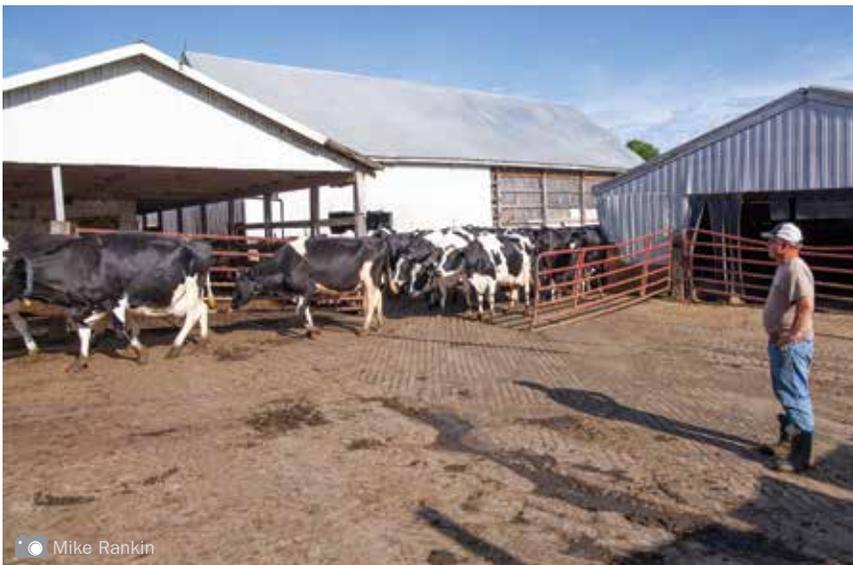




Do we help cows finish well?



Mike Rankin

SHORTLY after completing graduate school, I shadowed a partner of a leading feedlot nutrition consulting group in the southwestern U.S. I remember being shown some papers that were called “closeout reports.” As I was told, these summarized all of the pertinent information of a particular group of feeder cattle that had reached the end of the trail. It included details on feed cost, death loss, treatments, weights, gain, and some carcass information. In short, it told the complete story for a set of feeder cattle.



Martin

Fast forward nearly 30 years, and I was with a client observing the far-off dry cows and I was reminded of these “closeout reports.” On that day, I observed a few thin cows, and we took a little extra time to study the dry cow pens to investigate further.

Luckily for me, they were drying cows off the day of my visit. So, I suggested we find some of the newly dried off cows to see if we could learn anything from comparing how they looked to the ones already in the dry pen.

The week's dry cows were easy to find and evaluate as they stood in a pen waiting for their routine dry-off hoof trimming. We spent some time walking through these cows and discussing our observations. It turns out, that there were some cows in this group that could have used a few extra pounds to be the perfect body condition score (BCS) during the dry period.

If I happen to be on a farm on dry-off day, I always try to take a look to help me evaluate how that set of

cows finished the race of that lactation. Taking a little extra time to study these animals offers a unique look into the entire process of their lactation. In some ways, this evaluation is a bit like the closeout sheet for the feeders. Yes, this part is visual, but what if we took the concept a step further and generated a report that would add some metrics to our visual assessment.

Lactation closeouts

I like the concept of finishing well.

No matter if it is on a long project, a short project, or even life. The goal should be to finish well. For a cow who just completed its lactation and is ready for a 60-day vacation, we can take a little time to see if it in fact, finished well. This is what I might call a lactation closeout. We could look at this on an individual cow basis for each week's dry cow list or perhaps at a group level, but break it down by lactation. What could we learn from this effort?

For sure, what is done is done for the cows you might evaluate in a closeout. If you see things you don't like, you really don't have many tools to help these particular cows. But, what a great opportunity to take what you learned and consider potential changes for cows that are still in the milking string.

The easiest task here is to visually evaluate the dry-off cows. The first and most obvious consideration will be related to BCS. Does this group have a BCS that meets goals for the dairy? Is the BCS fairly consistent among the cows or do you see wide variations? Outlier's ear tags could be jotted down for some further investigation at the computer.

Evaluating BCS in late lactation pens is usually difficult. When simply walking through the late lactation group, you may not know what cows were just brought into the group and thus have a lower days in milk (DIM) compared to those who may be dried in the coming days.

But, if you evaluate the BCS of the cows on dry-off day, you will better know if the rations for the later lactation cows are on target.

What to evaluate

Another easy visual assessment would be hoof health. As these cows stand and wait to go on the trimming table, are you seeing long toes, thin heels, or other hoof abnormalities? On most dairies, cows are constantly screened for hoof issues that need attention during lactation. Corrective trimming in a timely fashion greatly improves the chances for the cow to return to proper locomotion and greatly increase its longevity in the herd.

If cows are observed with overgrown hooves, long toes, and so forth, perhaps the starch levels in the lactation diets are excessive and putting hoof health and overall cow health at risk. If an abundance of hoof issues are observed in the dry-day pen, the team responsible for identifying milk cows that need a corrective trim is not functioning at a high level.

Hoof health and locomotion score are not always the same thing. You may have an older cow with sound hooves but other challenges are causing it to have a painful stride. If so, are there areas of potential injury or negative aspects of cow comfort that are simply putting too much pressure on the body of an older animal?

Another area of potential visual observation might be udders. Do you see udders that should have classified a cow into the do-not-breed category? Do we have a pregnant dry cow that has an udder not suitable for another lactation? These are cows that perhaps should not have been bred, or at least, should be in the beef pen instead of the dry-off pen.

So much to learn

I think this time spent visually evaluating these dry-off cows can be greatly enhanced by a routine report with averages and individual cow data. On this report, we could include various items related to milk production, reproduction, cow health, culling, and so forth. These are like a set of runners that just finished the race.

If you could interview these runners after the finish line, and you wanted to learn more about how they did in the race, you could ask several questions. How long did you run? How many started the race compared to how many finished the race? Did these drop out voluntarily or were some forced out due to dire circumstances? What was your top speed? How much did you slow down at the end? The questions

could all be related to our group of dry-off cows.

Through the use of herd management software, we could find out the average DIM of each week's dry cows. This, along with some other reproduction numbers like times bred, DIM at first breeding, and so forth, could offer a great look into how successful these cows were at becoming pregnant.

What could we learn about culling? If you looked at the DIM range for these cows that are presented for dry-off and considered the corresponding freshening dates as a cohort, you could estimate death loss and culling numbers for this group.

In other words, these cows are the ones that successfully finished the race. How many were removed from the group along the way and why? The math on this wouldn't be exact, but each set of dry cows had cohorts that freshened alongside them that for various reasons, didn't finish the race.

Think of it like a graduation rate in a high school. How many dropped out along the way and why? More importantly, from the answer to that question, what can we learn about cow health, cow comfort, injuries, fresh cow disease, and so forth.

If I could handle one more complication in my client-visit scheduling procedure, I would try and always visit the dairies on dry-off days. What a great way to evaluate if my diets and the dairy's overall management approach is helping cows finish well.

Assuming this scheduling approach would likely not be workable for a consultant, perhaps a similar task could be completed by a farm manager each time cows are dried off. Creating a report in the computer that had some averaged metrics for this group as well as the ability to lookup outliers would be a significant addition to the visual appraisal.

Finishing well should be the goal in everything we do. Helping our cows do this will enhance the dairy's overall success. If you take a look at a group of just dried off cows, and they look as they should with correct BCS, healthy feet, and good udders, we can feel good about the nutrition and management of the herd. If instead, your dry-off pen looks a little too much like your beef pen, then we likely have some work to do encompassing nutrition, reproduction, and several other areas of dairy management.

If the visuals or the metrics are not hitting the mark, consider everything that influenced the dry cows being evaluated. Making appropriate changes is the only way to be sure that the ensuing sets of dry-off cows are groups you can be proud of. 🐮