Cornell Cooperative Extension Northwest NY Dairy Livestock and Field Crops Program

AG FOCUS

This Issue

Mid-Summer Forage Management in a Delayed Growing Season: Nutritional Quality, Regrowth Dynamics, and Pest Pressures

Jodi Letham

The 2025 forage production season in Western New York has been significantly shaped by an extended period of rainfall and below-average spring temperatures, resulting in delayed field access, disrupted cutting schedules, and altered crop physiology. As we transition into mid-summer, the emphasis for forage managers shifts toward optimizing subsequent harvests, correcting nutrient deficiencies, and actively scouting for pest pressure that can compound yield and quality losses.

Delayed First Cutting Implications for Nutritional Value

Widespread delays in first cutting—often exceeding 10 to 14 days beyond the target bud stage—have led to marked declines in relative forage quality (RFQ), neutral detergent fiber digestibility (NDFd), and crude protein concentrations. Alfalfa harvested past 30-32 days maturity typically sees a 3–5% increase in NDF per week of delay, while grasses accumulate lignin at an even faster rate. This has direct ration implications for high-producing dairy herds, increasing the need for purchased protein, starch, or digestible fiber to maintain milk components. Similarly, equine operations — particularly those feeding performance horses — face reduced intake potential and higher risk of respiratory issues from coarse or dusty hay.

Regrowth Physiology and Second Cut Timing

Alfalfa's regrowth following late first cutting often exhibits reduced carbohydrate reserves and root vigor, slowing early shoot emergence and elongation. Second cutting should be carefully timed to optimize both yield and NDFd recovery. The current recommendation remains 28–32 days post-cutting for pure alfalfa and 40–50 days for grass or mixed stands, depending on species composition and weather patterns. Plant height, stem elongation, and the appearance of early bud structures provide more precise indicators for scheduling the second harvest than calendar days alone.

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Mid-Summer Forage Management in a Delayed Growing Season: Nutritional Quality, Regrowth Dynamics, and Pest Pressures Cont.

Nutrient Dynamics Following Saturation Stress
Prolonged saturated soils earlier this season likely contributed to nitrogen leaching, potassium deficiencies, and potential root injury in both alfalfa and cool-season grass systems. Regrowth fields exhibiting pale coloration, reduced canopy density, or uneven growth may benefit from supplemental potassium (K2O) or sulfur applications to restore both yield potential and forage quality. Mid-season nutrient analysis via tissue sampling can be an effective diagnostic tool before additional investment in fertility.

Key Insect Pests: Current Threat Levels and Management
Potato leafhopper (Empoasca fabae) currently represents the primary insect threat across alfalfa acres throughout Western New York. Economic thresholds vary by plant height but typically range from 0.2 leafhoppers per sweep per inch of growth (e.g., a 6" alfalfa stand has a threshold of 1.2 PLH per sweep). Beyond threshold, feeding reduces photosynthetic area, stunts regrowth, and directly decreases yield and digestibility. Regular sweep net monitoring remains essential in second and third cut regrowth.

True armyworm (Mythimna unipuncta) may persist into July in isolated fields with volunteer small grains or grassy weed populations. Grasshoppers may become increasingly problematic in dry corners of fields as temperatures rise, with feeding activity concentrated on tender regrowth, particularly in grass hay systems. Though less frequently reaching threshold, occasional outbreaks of pea aphids and alfalfa weevil may warrant observation on vulnerable regrowth stands.

Moisture Management for Equine Hay Production
Forage producers targeting equine markets face heightened risk management concerns following delayed first cutting. Increased moisture content during harvest elevates the potential for microbial spoilage, dust formation, and mycotoxin development during storage. As subsequent cuttings progress, target moisture levels at 12–14% at baling for dry hay, utilizing in-field moisture testing and proper curing techniques to minimize respiratory health risks for horses.

Stand Longevity and Summer Cutting Height
As the season progresses into periods of elevated heat stress, maintaining cutting heights of 3 to 4 inches will help preserve critical crown tissue and promote root reserve accumulation, which is particularly vital for alfalfa and orchardgrass stand persistence. Fields entering third or fourth cut should be evaluated individually for regrowth uniformity, residual stubble, and plant vigor.

Summary
While the delayed spring has created challenges for both forage yield and quality across dairy and equine systems, the remainder of the 2025 season still presents meaningful opportunity to recover high-quality forage with properly timed harvests, targeted nutrient management, and proactive pest scouting. Frequent field evaluation remains the cornerstone of effective in-season forage management.

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Features Crop Alerts, Dairy Alerts, Bilingual (Spanish) Resources, Upcoming Events: and more from our team members.

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Right-Sizing a Farm Business: Measuring Economic Efficiency

John Hanchar

Summary

• Measuring production costs is a critical task when looking to right-size the farm business.
• For 2024 Dairy Farm Business Summary (DFBS) cooperators, the total cost of producing a hundred weight (cwt.) of milk varied considerably by farm size.
• Farms with results in the lower end of the cost range covered a range of farm sizes, small to large, suggesting that based upon this cost measure, farms of many sizes can achieve cost efficiencies.
• Least cost for a given size is an important achievement, but the business as structured may not be sufficient to meet owners' family living, and other financial goals, including, for example, at those times when the business looks to add family members as owners/operators.

Background

Farm business owners work to achieve economic, environmental, and community objectives by allocating available resources (land, labor, capital) among competing uses. Farm business management information sources often cover the topic of right-sizing. A quick review suggests a range of definitions including "the process of allocating available resources, inputs among competing uses to achieve objectives, including family financial objectives; given current, and expected market conditions." Recently, the farm press has reported on the farm size topic from economic, environmental, and community perspectives.

Farm economics and management concepts have much to contribute when one looks to right-size the farm business. Right-sizing relates to improving efficiencies as means for maintaining or improving profitability, while achieving other objectives of the farm business. Right-sizing, like any effort looking to achieve improved results, begins with measuring performance, and identifying possible areas for improvement.

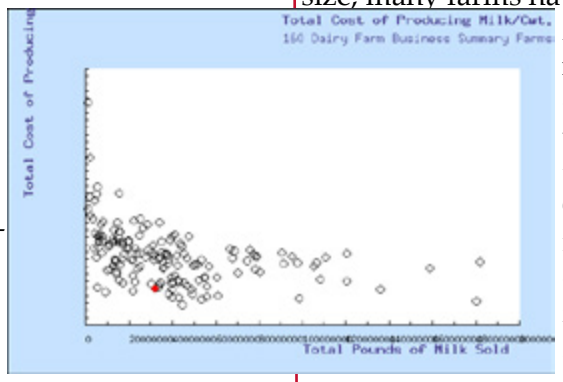
Measuring Efficiency

Owners, operators of farm businesses measure performance for many aspects of their businesses. For the business seeking improved efficiencies resulting from a right-sized allocation of resources, measuring results is an important step for identifying strengths, and weaknesses of the business. Successful implementation of these steps increases the likelihood of achieving business, and family objectives and goals. One measure of performance used by managers is the total cost of production.

The remainder of this article draws from Cornell University Cooperative Extension DFBS Program results, including its measure of the total cost of producing milk. For DFBS purposes, the total cost of producing milk includes the operating costs of producing milk (hired labor, feed, machinery operation, veterinary and medicine, crop inputs and others) plus depreciation on machinery and buildings, the value of unpaid family labor, the value of operators' labor and management, and the interest charge for using equity capital.

Total Cost of Producing a Cwt. of Milk, DFBS Cooperators, 2024

DFBS Program graphing tools generated the graph below. The total cost of producing a cwt. of milk in dollars is on the vertical, y axis. The total pounds of milk sold by the farm is on the horizontal, x axis. For discussion purposes, consider the average production per cow of about 27,000 lbs. per year. Then, each tick mark on the horizontal, x axis represents roughly 375 cows. Each tick mark on the vertical, y axis represents $4 per cwt.



When compared to the least cost producer for a given size, many farms have opportunities for improvement. Although few in number, farm businesses of various sizes achieve efficiency. Locate the $20 dollar mark on the vertical, y axis – the 5th tick mark from the origin (0,0) on the vertical, y axis. Observations suggest that although relatively few farms in total achieved costs near the $20 dollar mark, those farms represent a wide range of farm sizes.

With respect to right-sizing, pursuing cost efficiencies is an important first step. Next steps include assessing whether improved efficiency is sufficient to meet financial objectives of the owners, and families. Least cost production at a given size may not be enough to meet the family living draws, and other financial goals sought by the farm owners, operators.

Closing Thoughts

Right-sizing work can begin with an annual business summary, and analysis (See the December 2024 issue of Ag Focus regarding Annual Farm Business Summary Season). The farm manager can evaluate cost efficiency measures, including using comparisons to others, and then follow a problem solving framework to identify possible areas for improvement; and evaluate, decide upon, and implement changes to the farm business.

Managing Change

Kaitlyn Lutz

Well I hope by the time this newsletter is published your corn is up, manure out and first cutting bunks happily packed. As I write this, some farms are still finishing up planting and I have heard a fair share of frustrations. Luckily, farmers are adept at changing plans on the fly and adapting to external pressures over which you have no control.

My personal exposure to change came at a young age when my family moved abroad for a job opportunity, leading to me living in six different houses by the age of eight. I became much like a cow after that, craving consistency. At 25 years old I re-embraced uncertainty by moving to New Zealand to work as a dairy veterinarian on the Canterbury plains, an area with a progressive and growing dairy industry.

My mind was blown by the management practices there that worked while simultaneously being against everything I had been taught in school or I had seen in practice. Water sprayed all over the rotary during milking and no prep-routine with a somatic cell of 100,000. MUN's of 40 and conception rates to rival any of our NY farms. This was a great learning experience- don't be afraid to think outside of the box and challenge the norm.

As we move into a time of much change in the NY dairy industry between new processors with heightened standards and challenging workforce dynamics, I'm confident that NY dairy farmers will meet the moment with ingenuity.

On June 23rd, I moved into a new position with Cornell's Agricultural Workforce Development which I also plan to meet with ingenuity. This position is focused on Organizational Development. It's a broad term which basically refers to taking steps to align employees and stakeholders with the farm's goals. Much of this works on development of systems and culture. Some of the initial projects I will be working on include creation of onboarding materials to help employees understand the dairy industry (beyond the farm's SOP's), practical ways farms can implement LEAN management (efficiency by reworking processes), and farm workforce surveys. I'm all ears to understand how I can serve you in this new position, so please reach out: (585) 689-3114 or kal263@cornell.edu

I would like to thank my teammates on the NWNY team for a wonderful three and a half years. I would especially like to thank each farmer and employee that I have had the honor to work with during this time. It is due to your openness that I have gained a much broader understanding of the issues facing the NY dairy industry and some novel ways to approach them. I have come out of this experience as a better veterinarian, teacher and extension specialist and I sincerely thank you all for that. I look forward to continuing our work together in my new role. Take good care and cuidase mucho!

Field Day
2025 Aurora Farm Field Day

The annual Cornell Field Crop Research Field Day will be Thursday, July 24 at the Musgrave Research Farm, Aurora, N.Y. The program features walking and hay wagon tours in the morning and afternoon.

July 24, 2025
9:00 am - 4:00 pm
Musgrave Research Farm 1256 Poplar Ridge Road Aurora, NY 13026
https://cals.cornell.edu/field-crops/about/extension/field-days

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2015 MACK TITAN TD713 w/36" SLEEPER; 605 HP Mack MP10; 18-Spd. Manual Transmission; 18K Front Axle; 46K Locking Rears; Air Ride Susp.; 246" WB; Dual Exhaust & Air Cleaners; 3.91 Ratio; Wetline; 274,608 Miles; Stk. # 6957 - **$107,900**

2015 PETERBILT 365 CAB & CHASSIS; 455 HP Paccar MX13; Allison Auto. Trans.; Double Frame; 20K F/A; 46K Rears; Hendrickson Haulmaax Susp.; 278" WB; 208" CTR; 30' Frame; Pintle Hook; Plumbed For Pup Trailer; 295,209 Miles; Stk. # 6952 - **$68,500**

2013 PETERBILT 365 CAB & CHASSIS; Double Frame; 425 HP Cummins ISX12; 8LL Manual Trans.; 18,740# F/A; 46K Full Locking Rears; Air Trac Susp.; Steerable 20K Lift Axle; 322" WB; 24'8" Frame Behind Cab; 236" CT; PTO w/Controls; Frame Sandblasted and Painted; 205,052 Miles; Stk. # 6942 - **$72,900**

2014 KENWORTH T880 DAYCAB; 500 HP Paccar MX13; 18-Spd. Manual; 14.6K F/A; 46K Full Locking Rears; Kenworth 8-Bag Air Ride Susp.; 12R22.4 Front Tires; 11R22.5 Rear Tires; 202" WB; 3.91 Ratio; 507,195 Miles; Stk. # 6965 - **$55,900**

2009 INTERNATIONAL PAYSTAR 5600i; Cummins 430 HP; Engine Brake; Alison Automatic Trans.; 20K F/A; 65K Rears; Hendrickson Spring; 244" WB; PTO; Double Frame; Supreme 1400T Tailgate Chute; (2) Mixing Augers; Wide Rear Conveyor; 35,054 Miles; Stk. # 6901 - **$108,700**

2019 WESTERN STAR 4900 DAY CAB; 560/600 HP Clean Detroit DD16 Engine; Allison 4500 RDS Auto. Trans.; 13,220# F/A; 46K Full Locking Rears; AirLiner Susp.; 204" WB; Headache Rack; Dual Exhaust & Air Cleaners; 4.56 Ratio; 484,488 Miles; Stk. # 6971 - **$89,900**

2000 PETERBILT 357 w/KUHN KNIGHT VT180 VERTICAL FEED MIXER; Truck Scale System; Cummins ISM (Recent In-Frame Overhaul); Allison Auto. (Reman Weller Trans.); 20K F/A; 46K Rears; 397,000 Miles; 6,889 Hours; Stk. # 6829 - **$78,900**

2006 KENWORTH T800 CHASSIS; Heavy Single Frame; 390 HP CAT C13; 13-Spd. Manual; 16K F/A; 46K Full Locking Rears; Air Ride Susp.; 22'6" Frame Behind Cab; 168" CT; 85,554 Miles; Stk. # 6785 - **$49,900**

2007 WESTERN STAR 6900 CAB & CHASSIS; XD TRI-DRIVE; Double Frame; 490 HP Reman Detroit 14L Engine In 2015; Allison RDS4500 Trans.; 20K F/A; 69K Full Locking Rears; 272" WB; 330" Bridge; 25'6" Frame Behind Cab; Front Engine PTO; 7.17 Ratio; Stk. # 6481 - **$59,450**

(3) 2017 PETERBILT 567 DAYCAB; 500+ HP Clean Paccar MX13 Engine; Allison 4500 RDS Auto. Trans.; 12K F/A; 46K Locking Rears; Air Trac Suspension; 206" WB; 4.30 Ratio; Wetline; 462K/521K/567K Miles; Stk. # 6997/6998/6999 - **$58,900 Ea.**

2014 FREIGHTLINER CORONADO SD122 CAB CHASSIS Clean, Double Frame; 450 HP Cummins ISX15; Allison 4500 RDS Auto. Trans.; 18K F/A; 46K Full Locking Rears On AirLiner Susp.; (2) 11K Steerable Lift Axles; 292" WB; 198" CT; 24'8" Frame Behind Cab; 4.10 Ratio; 374,584 Miles; Stk. # 6976 - **$68,900**

2015 WESTERN STAR 4900SB TRI-DRIVE DUMP TRUCK; Double Frame; 560 HP Detroit DD16; 18-Spd. Manual; 20' Tub Style Steel body; 20K F/A; 57K Full Locking Rears; Plumbed For Pup Trailer; AirLiner Susp. 355,813 Miles; Stk. # 6780 - **$87,000**

2013 PETERBILT 367 DAYCAB; Very Clean; 390 HP Cummins ISX; Allison Auto. Trans.; 212" WB; 20K F/A; 46K Full Locking Rears; Wetline; Air Trac Susp.; 18,400 lb. Chassis Weight; 15' Frame Behind Cab; 130" CT; 213,229 Miles; Stk. # 6768 - **$74,900**

1999 INTERNATIONAL PAYSTAR 5000 DOUBLE FRAME DAYCAB; Cummins N14 370+ HP; Allison Auto. Trans.; 184" WB; NEWAY Air Ride Susp.; Wetline; Rubber 95%; 90,427 Miles; Stk. # 6745 - **$34,900**

2005 PETERBILT 357 CAB & CHASSIS; Cummins ISM 385 HP; Jake Brake; Allison Auto. Trans.; 20K F/A; 46K Rears; 252" WB; 21' Frame Behind Cab; 168" CT; Chalmers Susp.; Rear Engine PTO (REPTO); Frame Has Been Sandblasted and Painted; 68,882 Miles and 14,682 Hours; Stk. # 6924 - **$56,900**

(2) 2007 MACK CHN613 DAY CAB TRACTOR; Low Mileage; 380/410 HP Mack AC; 13-Spd. Manual; 14K F/A; 44K Rears On Camelback Susp.; 210" WB; Wetline, 63K/45K/53K Miles; Stk. #6873/6872/6895 - **$42,900**

2012 MACK LEU613 PACKER; Double Frame; Labrie Side Load Packer; 20K F/A; 46K Rears; Haulmaax Susp.; Allison Auto. Trans.; LH/RH Side Drives; 212" WB; 180" CT; 20'6" Frame Behind Cab if the Packer is Removed. ***HP Can Be Increased to 395-425 with Software Flash.*** 59,375 Miles/13,276 Hours - **$54,000**

2009 MACK GRANITE GU813 CAB & CHASSIS; Double Frame; Mack 395 HP; Allison Auto.; 20K F/A; 46K R/A; Air Ride Susp.; 280" WB; 20'6" Frame Behind Muffler; 174" Frame Behind Muffler To Center of Trunnion; 169,543 Miles; Stk. # 6550 - **$58,900**

2004 STERLING L9500 DUMP TRUCK; Double Frame; Mercedes OM 460LA 18-Spd. Manual; 24' Alfab Alum. Body w/60" Sides and 6" Sideboards; Tarp; 20K F/A; 46K Locking Rears; Hendrickson HN Susp.; (4) 11K Steerable Lift Axles; 425/65R22.5 Front, 11R24.5 Drive Tires; 310" WB; 246" CVT; 24'6" Frame Behind Cab; 583,000 Miles; Stk. # 6931 - **$62,900**

2007 STERLING LT9500 CAB & CHASSIS; Clean; Double Frame; 385 HP CAT C13; Allison Auto.; 20K F/A; 46K R/A; Hendrickson Spring Susp.; 248" WB; 184" CT; 21' Frame Behind Cab (Muffler Takes Up 14'); 276,988 Miles; Stk. # 6914 - **$49,500**

2005 PETERBILT 357 CAB & CHASSIS; Cummins ISM 350 HP; Jake Brake; Allison Auto. Trans.; 20K F/A; 46K Rears; 252" WB; 21' Frame Behind the Cab; 168" CT; Chalmers Susp.; Rear Engine PTO (REPTO); Frame Has Been Sandblasted and Painted; 163,857 Miles and 17,869 Hours; Stk. # 6925 - **$56,900**

2000 OSHKOSH; Detroit Diesel V8 500 HP Turbo Diesel Engine; Engine Brake; Automatic Trans.; 86,000 lb. GVWR; Two 55,000 lb. Winches; Aux. Winch; 8x8; Rear Wheel Steer; Exhaust Brake; Air Ride Susp.; PTO; Fifth Wheel Ramp Plates; Central Tire Inflation System; Stk. # 6696 - **$59,900**

2010 MACK TITAN TD713 RAWHIDE DAYCAB; 605 HP Mack MP10; Maxitorque ES 18-Spd. Transmission; Headache Rack; 18K F/A; 46K Full Locking Rears; Neway Air Ride Susp.; 220" WB; Wetline; 437,396 Miles; Stk. # 7028 - **$64,000**

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Be Prepared for a More Normal Wheat Harvest

Mike Stanyard

2025 Wheat Season In-Review

Yes, 2025 is on par for a more normal harvest timeframe. Last year was far from normal and some harvested at the end of June and had double crop soybeans planted by July 1. Based on what I am seeing, wheat harvest will be focused more on the second and third week of July.

I have seen a lot of wheat in June and I feel we look really good. I think it is going to be an average year. Sure, there will be some better yields where fields got planted earlier and some not as good that were on heavier soil and sat with wet feet for longer than normal. We definitely do better with our wheat yields on drier years.

As I write this on June 17, wheat is maturing and filling quickly. Much of our wheat flowered during a period of high risk of Fusarium infection based on the Fusarium head blight risk map. I was able to find some infected kernels with Fusarium on June 11 throughout the Finger Lakes region. Hoping that it doesn't continue to develop and we reach the finish line. There were many acres treated with fungicides and drones sprayed a lot of these acres because of the wet soil conditions. Overall, pests have not been an issue for us. Cereal leaf beetles were not prevalent, armyworms have been a no-show so far and leaf diseases have not been a player despite the many days of leaf wetness.

Fusarium detected on June 11 in Wayne County. Photo: M. Stanyard, CCE/NWNY Team

Harvest Preparation

Know your grain moisture and have the combine prepared to go when it is time to pull the trigger. As we know, weather and field conditions do not always cooperate during harvest. Many producers will start harvesting at 20% to avoid pre-harvest sprouting and dry it down to 13%. Producers who don't have dryers and rely on field drying run the greater risk of reduced grain quality. The first harvested wheat will have the best quality. If you did not spray a fungicide at flowering, vomitoxin from FHB could be a concern. Look for pink coloration and shrunken kernels in the heads. If these conditions are present, set the combine fans to high and try to blow these light kernels back onto the field.

Grain Bin Preparation

Storage facilities should be inspected thoroughly prior to grain fill. Look for openings, leaky vents, fallen supports, and signs of rodents. Bird nests are always a treat to find in the auger or vents. Stored grain insects survive in old grain, so thorough cleaning is the first line of defense. Clean up all the remaining grain on the floor of the bin. Take a long-handled broom and remove any grain stuck to the walls, around the door, supports, ladder rungs and in the fan opening. If there are lots of fines remaining on the floor, clean up with a shop vacuum. It is amazing how many insect eggs and larvae are in a small amount of material. The same is true for grain handling equipment such as augers and drying bins.

After the bin is cleaned out, an insecticide application will help keep the grain mass clean. This can be more helpful the longer you keep the grain in storage. We are very limited when it comes to empty bin insecticide treatments. Tempo SC ULTRA is labeled just for empty bin treatments, not on grain. Other products that are labeled for empty bin treatment as well as a grain protectant on wheat include: deltamethrin (Suspend SC, D-fense SC, Centynal EC), Centynal Synergized Insecticide (deltamethrin + piperonyl butoxide), Gravista Insecticide or Diacon IGR Plus (deltametrin + piperonyl butoxide + S – methoprene). Diatomaceous earth is a non-insecticidal silica sand applied as a dust in the bin and below the floor. Storcide II was a major product used for insect protection, but registration was canceled in 2024 because it contained chlorpyriphos.

It is not in the bin yet, but overall, winter wheat in NWNY looks good. The last USDA National Ag Statistics Service report published on May 25 rated the NY winter wheat crop as 6% excellent, 20% good, 71% fair and 3% poor. I think we will be better than that in NWNY. Fingers crossed that the grain quality will be there.

Great looking wheat in Seneca County on June 16. Photo: M. Stanyard, CCE/NWNY Team

Ask Extension: How Do I Deal with Pasture Compaction?

Nancy Glazier

I was recently asked this question. After this spring's wet weather at the start of the grazing season, livestock pugging occurred. Also, standing water contributes to compaction, which can lead to yield loss due to root growth restriction and reduced water infiltration, and erosion. When pore space is diminished, water holding capacity declines, along with the biota, large and small. Pastures will become droughty more quickly.

A simple test to determine if soil compaction in your pastures is evident is to take a fiberglass post and push it in the pasture soil and along the fence line to compare the resistance. If there is a noticeable difference, then your soils are probably compacted. Usually, the top 3-4 inches are impacted from hoof traffic.

Soil health is what the issue really should be about and considers the chemical, biological and physical properties. Healthy soils will recover more quickly from disturbances with a decline in any of these impacting soils and limiting productivity. Many studies have shown compaction from pugging can occur in one event on wet pastures with recovery taking weeks. Prevention is the ideal scenario, but not always practical. What can be done to mitigate the problem after it occurs? Here's a few suggestions.

- Tillage is not the first choice as a remedy for compaction, especially for clay soils. This aerates the soil and increases organic matter decomposition. Aeration of pastures is a temporary fix, too.
- Graze plants at a taller height when wet. The higher amounts of forage provide a bit of a cushion.
- If at all possible, keep livestock off wet pastures. Try to graze dryer pastures.
- Remember, graze half, leave half. If more than half of the leaf volume is removed, root growth if significantly impacted.
- Make hay, if you have the option. Taller growth allows for roots to grow through compaction. There will need to be longer rest if this takes place. Of course, wait for the soils to dry before harvest.
- There are times when renovation is needed. Add sod-forming grasses to the mix, such as Kentucky bluegrass, perennial ryegrass, or smooth bromegrass. This provides more of a mat to protect the ground.
- Use caution with winter bale grazing. Roll out hay so livestock don't stand in the same place for an extended period. Or, set out bales and limit access to each bale with fencing.
- Move water troughs and mineral feeders to new areas in the pastures.
- Tile wet areas of pastures to improve drainage.

What are those lines on the cows? This question was asked on a recent visit to a beef herd on pasture. They are happy lines, also known as health lines, and I have tried to discover what they are and why they show up. They can be seen as somewhat parallel lines on the lower part of the ribs, easily seen on cattle with sleek, healthy coats. I see them during the grazing season, though they can be seen on well managed confinement cows. Since I see more animals in pasture settings that's where they are most familiar to me. They may be present in winter but more difficult to see with winter coats. The link may be high forage diets, possibly low amounts of fermented feeds.

There is little information available. I read a blog post on the CowSignals® website from 2017. An online search will come up with photos and stories but no hard science. Several years ago I heard Dr. Hue Karreman, Penn Dutch Cow Care (now retired), refer to them at an on-farm event. He said they are seen on animals with strong immune systems and on a high plane of nutrition, and are related to essential fatty acids.

Another theory is they are related to deposits of volatile fatty acids (VFA), according to Dr. Paul Dettloff, former consultant for Organic Valley. This may have to do with a near neutral rumen pH, possibly low grain and low silage diet. It could be related to higher butterfat production in dairy cows. Acetic acid is used by mammary cells to produce fat. The more acetic acid, the higher the milk fat content.
Yet another opinion is from Steve Campbell, bovine consultant, they are related to glandular expression of optimum nutrition and health.

So, there are discrepancies, but the overriding theme is optimum health and nutrition. These lines are much easier to see on cattle after they have shed out. Nutrition and hair coat are related, but there is more to this than we know. Look at your cows and maybe you will see them.

Overcrowding Hacks

Margaret Quaassdorff

There are many farms in expansion mode in our region. During this time, we know that cows and workers are stressed and are asked to do their best in systems that were not meant to accommodate so many animals. A dairy can still function well when pens are overcrowded, and many do chronically. The key is to provide the best possible access to comfortable stalls, and to remove other stressors that may be adding up elsewhere. When additional stressors compound crowding stress, then dairies start to experience more issues. Here are a few areas to consider in order to help alleviate crowding stress for the cows in your pens.

Freestall maintenance and bed availability. When was the last time you walked your freestalls and checked the status of each bed? Cow pushers and those who bed and maintain the stalls know which stalls the cows do not lay in for whatever reason. Ask them to mark those stalls with some tape, and review why it is undesirable to the cows. Are the loops bent making it too narrow to enter? Is it wet from a leaking waterer, or from rain or snow blowing in and a barrier could be put in place? Is the mattress or other stall surface properly maintained and comfortable, or does it need to be replaced? Are neck rails and brisket boards in the correct position to allow cows to enter and lay down comfortably? Fixing stalls that are currently not being used is the first step to decreasing stocking density rate…and stress.

Rebalance groups to "under-crowd" fresh cows and choose to overcrowd later lactation cows. Typically, we try to keep milking groups balanced, but heat stress in the summer along with natural seasonality can reduce the number of pregnancies, causing calving slugs at different times of the year. This can be a perpetual cycle, but recognizing which months of the year the fresh cow pen has extra pressure, and choosing to move some cows out of that area quicker than the standard time, and adding extra cows in the later lactation groups (and adjusting the ration for the potentially increased milk production in that group) is a strategy worth considering.

Improve access to, and availability of, feed. One of the areas we can change management for some relief in times of overcrowding stress is at the feedbunk. Make sure the nutritionist has the right information to design a ration that is well-balanced for the stage and status of cows in the group. If you are planning a group change, help them to understand better what the dynamic of the new group is. Relaying the changes to the feeder is also key.

Increase your pushups. Overcrowded cows tend to eat in rotation, or sittings. If they have reservations at 7pm, it is important to push up after the 6pm sitting to ensure similar availability and quality for them. Most cows will not change their preferred feeding location along the bunk. Feed heavy on the ends of the barns and where many cows prefer to eat the most. Watch that cows do not run out of feed along the bunk or in these highly desired eating areas. Feeding to slick bunks is asking for trouble in an overcrowded herd.

Cows who are crowded eat faster, leading to potential rumen upsets, lower rumen efficiency, and maybe lower de novo fatty acid synthesis and components. It might be an interesting discussion with your nutritionist to see if there are changes that can be made to optimize rumen health in these conditions.

Consider going to 2x from 3x milking. Hear me out. If there is so much rushing to get cows through the parlor three times daily, get the beds maintained, and feed the cows, that your system is inconsistent on milking and feed availability and access to the cows, then you may be better off trading that extra milking for consistency. This, of course, is something to talk over with your consultants. Ask them, with our resources and management capabilities, how much milk should my herd be able to make at 3x daily milking? If that is way below the average for other 3x herds, and consistency and time budgets seem to be the bottleneck, you may actually gain in milk production by switching to twice daily milking.

Each dairy is going to be different as to which options they possess to help alleviate facility stress on their cows. The best thing to do is to evaluate the system as a whole, and start making small improvements in several areas. They will add up, and the cows will thank you in strong production and components with fewer negative health incidences.

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