

10 Simple but Effective New Year's Resolutions to Improve your Dairy:

1. *Set Goals*

You don't have to set extravagant goals to be successful. Start small and make sure that your goals are practical and achievable. When it comes to goal setting in the dairy industry, we are often looking at numbers (ADG, milk yield, butterfat, etc.), but a lot of the time it has less to do with the numbers and more to do with motivation. You will find yourself much more motivated and encouraged if you see small goals and targets being reached. Another important aspect of goal keeping is to set a timeline. Are you setting a goal to be reached in a week? A month? A year? It's important to document timelines so you can measure progress along the way.

2. *Pay Attention to Your Far-Off Dry Cows*

Once the cow is dried off it can be way too easy to just forget about her until she either enters the close-up pen, or maybe even the maternity pen. Far-off management is equally as important as close-up management – especially when we consider body condition gain and energy requirements. Over-consuming energy in the far-off period can be very detrimental to post-calving success, making it very important to monitor body condition scores (BCS) throughout the dry period. It's one extra step, but I encourage you to document BCS at dry off, about half way through the dry period, and then again at calving. Take note if cows are gaining or losing BCS during this time frame. It won't cost you anything, other than your time, and it can be a great strategy for troubleshooting any potential transition cow issues.

3. *Look at Behavior*

Changes in behavior can often be used to identify sick cows well before any physiological or clinical signs present themselves. It doesn't take much effort to observe how cows are acting when you are in the pen with them, when you are feeding, or when you are simply going about your day-to-day activities. At the cow level, look for abnormal feeding behaviors (such as sorting, eating at one end of the bunk relative to another, excessively licking salt blocks, drastic changes in feed refusals), and be sure to communicate any findings with the appropriate staff. If you have access to technology, pay attention to changes in rumination and use this to guide you in your decision making. If you don't have access to technology, observe cud chewing as good and free alternative to evaluate rumen health. At the calf level, pay attention to changes in feeding behavior and activity. Calves that seem less aggressive to drink, or start consuming more water all of a sudden may be starting to get sick. Behavioral indicators of disease often present themselves well before physiological indicators and they can become very helpful in identifying sick animals early.

4. *Give Calves Warm Water*

On the topic of calves drinking water, be sure to give calves warm free-choice water. Not only is water provision now a requirement for calves ≥ 3 days old, but it will also encourage solid feed

intake and promote growth. Regardless of how you are providing water (bucket, trough, etc.), make sure that it is clean and fresh.

5. *Clean Your Lights and Fans*

This is one that can easily get overlooked, but you'd be surprised of how big of a difference it can make! Set a reminder on your phone to clean the lights and fans (in all your animal facilities) at least twice a year.

6. *Clean the Water Troughs*

Water is the most important nutrient to the cow, yet it is so easily overlooked. Water troughs should be cleaned often to reduce bacterial growth and improve water quality. It will take a little bit of time, but a little bit of elbow grease and maybe even some disinfectant will go a long way. Click [here](#) to read an article on proper dilution rates if you want to learn more. You may also want to test your water on an annual basis to make sure the mineral levels are where they need to be.

7. *Improve Your Record Keeping*

Record keeping can be a pain in the butt if you don't have a good system in place, but it provides very meaningful and important data for your farm. Keeping good treatment records is the most obvious, but keeping good observational records can also be very beneficial for early disease intervention. If you aren't using a computer record keeping system, that is okay! There are many resources out there for keeping good hand-written records that can be just as effective. Reach out if you would like templates or need help with getting started on record keeping.

8. *Remember: it's not always the nutritionist fault!*

It's very apparent from working with farmers that when things are running smoothly and cows are making lots of milk, the nutritionist is the best person in the room. But when things are going poorly... well, that's a different story. This year, I encourage you to adopt a different way of thinking and communicating with your nutritionist. If things on the farm start heading south, start by brainstorming what you perceive the problem to be. Then, initiate a conversation with him/her. Your nutritionist will value hearing your perception on the situation and will appreciate that you are invested in coming up with a solution. It's very important to remember that nutrition can only take the herd so far, and that management plays an equally important role. If you are interested in learning more on how to improve communication with your nutritionist and better understand the diets in front of you, click [here](#) to watch a recording of our past webinar titled "It's Always My Nutritionist's Fault! Understanding Diets and Improving Communication on Your Dairy".

9. *Ask for Help*

This one may seem a little counter intuitive to all the hard-working dairy farmers out there, but it is okay to ask for help! There are many great resources at your fingertips, whether they are

the consultants and advisors you work with on a regular basis, your local extension team, or even your friends, family, and neighbors. Take advantage of the resources around you – it's what we are all here for!

10. Be Kind to Yourself

To say 2020 was challenging is an understatement. The past year was filled with mental, financial, physical, familial, and health stressors to name a few. You are allowed to cut yourself some slack and give yourself a little bit of grace. A lot of you were, and maybe still are, in a chronic state of stress, which can influence your brain chemistry and have a negative impact on both mental and physical health. Be extra kind to yourself and to those around you as you navigate through the uncertainty and the upcoming year.