

DAIRY-UPDATE

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Mycotoxins: The Neighbourhood Problem

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I recently had two cases submitted to me by producers who wondered why their milk production had dropped off this fall.

CASE ONE:

In the first case I noticed some unusual things that had happened along with depressed milk production. The first thing was that four cows had not eaten their grain mix. Also their manure was not consistent with that of the rest of the herd. The final thing that occurred to me was that the fresh cows were holding on to their swelling for several weeks. The ration included ensiled round bales, corn and barley, none of which was showing anything suspicious to me. Several things could be causing these symptoms, from poor water to other feed related issues. On the other hand, all these problems could show up if mycotoxins are present. My suggestion was to use a binding agent to reduce the absorption of the toxins in the GI tract of the cow. Feed tests were sent away and came back confirming the presence of mycotoxins in the silage and corn. After putting in the binder, the appetites returned and milk production increased.

CASE TWO:

In case two, it was more evident that we may have a problem because the corn silage showed pink coloured tips and black spots, and moreover had a strong musty mould odour. The farmer had noticed a drop in appetite and in milk production. He also had several embryonic abortions. He had already envisioned getting rid of all his corn silage and starting with a new ration. My suggestion was to reduce part of the corn silage immediately and use a binding agent for the remaining mycotoxins. By doing this we could salvage some of the silage for feed. I suggested that we elevate the immunity of the herd by using chelated minerals and organic selenium. Three days after following my recommendations and binding up the mycotoxins, the herd regained its appetite and the production came back up slowly.

There are certain references that state a ration containing as little as 0.3ppm of mycotoxins is likely to cause certain symptoms with dairy herds. The tolerance threshold will vary according to the stress level that each herd faces. The symptoms will also vary equally according to the combinations of toxins present. The toxins will cause reduced feed intake of the cows. The feed they do eat has less nutrient value due to the moulds using the nutrients for themselves to grow. Lower fertility rates, silent heats and embryonic abortions are often the other symptoms producers will notice. Finally, the mycotoxins affect the immune system of the cow, leaving her very susceptible to stress and infections. Many times the mycotoxins are growing in your field unbeknownst to you and you have very few ways of checking on their presence. This is why it is so very important that you be very attentive to the signs your cows are giving you. Watching your cows closely and reacting quickly will help you deal with the problem the best you can and thus help reduce the effects of the mycotoxins.

We have all heard the reasons for toxins this year from plant variety, to time of planting, crop rotation, the August heat and plentiful fall moisture, but the fact still remains that it is very present this year. Make sure you are sampling your feed not only for nutrients, but also for the toxins and use all the tools available to make your cows healthier and more productive.

The Quota Saga Continues – How Do You Handle It?

By Colin Pool

How do you handle quota fluctuations? The Ontario Milk Marketing Board issues quota cuts and incentives as the consumption changes in the province. This keeps producers scrambling to have calving strategically planned so that they can make the best use of their production. When incentives are given it is not a hard decision to make, either have a few cows ready to calve or purchase in the extra livestock to fill the bill. Recent cattle prices at the local sales establishment reflected this quite well. Quota incentives added extra value to the fresh cows this fall. For producers with extra cattle, it was a welcome thing since cattle prices had been so depressed due to the BSE hardships for the past number of years. At this point, producers pay very close attention to feeding and feed stuffs to keep the production levels up. What happens when we get the dreaded quota cut and how do we feed our cows then?

I go into herds and usually ask the same questions, like, how are the cows milking? How are they feeling? Are they calving in well? One response that I get about the milking well part is that they were, but now they have backed off. My next question would be what's changed? The response I get then is we have had a quota cut so I backed them off. I cut back the grain and soybean meal and now I'm within my quota. The OMMB may be happy and you may be happy, but your cows won't be. Your nutritionist has balanced a ration to make sure all the requirements are met for maintenance, production and reproduction. You have succeeded in making your cows back off in milk production and keeping your quota in check, but you have also succeeded in lowering your reproductive status, as well as lowering your cows' body condition. Cows today are bred to milk and they will give and give with the tools they have to use. When she doesn't have the proper feed intake, she will take it off her back and then the problems begin. I don't want to go into all of them

because it gets depressing and will probably bring up some bad memories for some of you.

How should we handle quota cuts? Here are my suggestions. Look through your herd and see if someone isn't pulling her weight. Tightening up culling practices can boost herd efficiency. The next thing I would look at is to see if there are some cows who need a break or who just should go dry early. This is a good chance to fix up some condition problems or feet problems that may be showing up in the herd. The last two things are selling off a fresh cow or opening the cooler and dumping milk. Both of these options are not very appealing for their own reasons. Maybe a little planning ahead would help out when the quota cuts hit and the loss of revenue won't be so severe because our cows are healthier and ready to produce.

The last two answers to my questions usually fall into place when I get the response from the first one. Cows are not a machine where you can start them up and shut them down as you want. The most profitable herds we see have a good handle on management, cow comfort and feeding. Look at your setup today and see where you excel and be proud of it, then look again and see where changes need to be made and use the tools available to you to make your operation more profitable.

DAIRY UPDATE is published in the interest of helping dairy producers become more profitable. We welcome your comments.

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