

Vet's Corner: Employee Incentives

Labor management is not a topic that dairy producers commonly associate with their herd health Veterinarian; but Gregory Billikopf threw some challenges our way during his recent agriculture labor management seminar at the W. H. Miner Institute.

Few employee incentive practices have improved farm performance in our experience. For farms seeking to improve reproductive performance, a common incentive is to pay \$2-5 to the employee, who identifies a cow in heat that becomes pregnant. In those herds, on pregnancy check day, it is common to be presented with several five months pregnant cows that were identified as "in heat" by an aggressive employee seeking the \$2-5 reward. Accuracy of heat detection is not rewarded by this incentive, so an excessive number of cows are presented for breeding in hopes that they will actually be in heat. Few additional pregnancies are produced and some may be lost due to passing an A. I. gun through a pregnant cervix.

Likewise, rewards for lowering SCC count are used. But there are several reasons that SCC can drop besides better employee performance. The farm owner/manager deserves the reward if she decided to change from 2X to 3X milking schedule or the improvement may be due to improved weather conditions which are outside the employees' control. The farm manager may have decided to cull a few chronic mastitis cows which lowered bulk tank SCC and should not pay an employee bonus for the decision.

Instead of rewarding on the basis of some of these popular benchmark endpoints, it may benefit the dairy more directly to reward employees on the basis of their adoption of specific processes that will lead to a better endpoint. This is where the consulting Veterinarian can assist.

In the case of rewarding for improved reproductive performance, it is often difficult to find the cause for the poor performance. A common start is to implement a reproductive hormone protocol, i.e. Presynch. Instead of rewarding for more pregnancies, wouldn't it be fairer to compensate the employee who makes sure that 100% of the cows actually got the shots and were bred on time? Compliance with the protocol can be monitored by the herd health Vet on a variety of consultant DHIA software programs.

Improved maternity pen management has been stressed in past Farm Reports. Monitoring mortality rate of calves and/or serum protein levels of newborn calves could be used to reward employees, who take the time to watch cows in labor and feed colostrum immediately to newborn calves.

Several possibilities exist on the farm for incentive pay ideas for employees. If the farm decides to invest energy in a new process to improve herd health, the Veterinarian could provide monitors to see if labors' compliance deserves additional compensation.

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