

## Three tips ease dairy transition

By ELLIOT BLOCK\*

THE transition period — defined as three weeks prepartum through three weeks postpartum — has the most profound influence on cow performance in the upcoming lactation.

Unfortunately, this is also when cows are most susceptible to going off feed, experiencing metabolic disorders and being culled.

Nutritionists play a critical role in helping herds navigate these challenging times. The following are three tips producers can apply to help their cows maintain health and performance once in the milking string.

1. Formulate rations for success. Dry matter intake (DMI) can decline as much as 30% as calving approaches, so it's critical that the ration provided to transition cows is nutrient rich and highly palatable. By minimizing the drop in DMI, cows can maintain energy balance, boost immune function and

reduce the incidence of metabolic disorders.

One proven way to help maintain DMI in prepartum and postpartum groups is to balance rations for dietary cation-anion difference (DCAD).

Negative DCAD levels of -8 to -12 milliequivalents (meq) per 100 g of ration dry matter prior to calving help keep cows eating while reducing the incidence of metabolic disorders and increasing peak milk and production levels throughout lactation. Negative DCAD levels prepartum pull calcium from the bones, mobilizing the blood calcium needed to prevent milk fever.

Positive DCAD levels of 35-45 meq/100 g of ration dry matter postpartum replace the potassium lost through daily maintenance and milk production. During heat stress conditions, a positive DCAD also replaces the potassium lost through additional sweating and panting. A positive DCAD has been shown to increase DMI, fat-corrected milk yield and feed efficiency by allowing for a better blood acid-base profile.

2. Minimize pen moves and group

changes. Take time to watch animal movement. Avoid unnecessary pen moves since cows often eat less and experience depressed immune function as they become acclimated to new pen mates and surroundings.

Separate heifers and older cows, when possible, to meet specific nutritional, social and environmental needs.

3. Provide comfort, and monitor behavior. Comfort is key throughout the transition period. Maximize cow comfort to encourage increased lying time while reducing standing and walking time. This can be done by providing clean, dry and comfortable beds, lots or corrals. Minimize stressors by moderating pen densities and implementing heat stress abatement practices.

Dairy nutrition consultants should help their clients continually monitor cow performance to ensure that cows are eating and appear healthy. Design fresh cow monitoring and treatment programs, working closely alongside the herd veterinarian so everyone is in agreement on transition cow health, performance and management. ■

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