

HOOF HEALTH

Take A Step In The Right Direction

There are many things that can affect hoof health in dairy herds. But there are two factors with potentially long-lasting effects that farmers don't always consider.

Entering into the hottest season of the year, most producers are already on the lookout for signs of heat stress. But as we worry about cooling our cows down and keeping their milk flowing in spite of the weather, we may not consider the long-term effects of heat and humidity on hoof health.

Similarly, as producers continue to battle financial instability in milk prices, it can be difficult to focus on what cutting hoof trimming from the farm budget really means.

"With the drop in dairy prices last year, trimming got pulled back pretty hard on a lot of operations and we're seeing the resultant problems now from overdue footcare," says Adam C.W. Kauf, Agri-Basics nutritionist in Bedford and Blair counties, Pennsylvania.

Putting hoof trimming on the back burner can be far more costly than it first appears.

Cows afflicted with abscesses, ulcers, hairy warts, heel erosion and claw lesions can usually get by for a while. But none of these problems heal themselves. Without proper attention, a cow with hoof problems will eventually stop walking well. Her production will suffer. And a cow that is ultimately culled for lameness can't be milked. Which means a move to save a few hundred dollars has now cost a producer several thousand dollars due to the milk that the lame cow no longer supplies.

Ideally, hoof problems are caught in the early stages, when a visit from the hoof trimmer or a little time on the trimming table a farmer owns is all that is needed to rectify any problems.

Kauf says his "bare minimum" suggestion for trimming is once a year for every cow in the herd (often done at dryoff). He prefers, however, that each cow be checked and trimmed (if needed) at least twice a year – about every six months or so.

This is important for every operation, Kauf notes, but perhaps even more so for cows that are kept solely on concrete. Cows that aren't pastured don't get a break from the stress of constant contact with a hard surface. The weight of their bodies on their

hooves as they stand continually on a surface that has no "give" can lead their claws to spread, opening up their feet to even more potential problems.

Like other Agri-Basics nutritionists, Kauf is a firm believer in the preventative benefits of a weekly footbath. His preference is that cows walk through a five-percent copper sulfate solution at least two days in a row each week to be sure the treatment is effective. The solution should be changed every 150 to 200 cows.

Dairy experts at Penn State University recommend that producers clean cows' feet with water or have the cows walk through a water bath before entering the footbath. This removes some sediment, allowing the copper sulfate to better penetrate the hoof. If hooves begin to harden too much, the frequency of footbath use can be reduced.

Hoof trimming should be done by someone trained in the proper techniques. Cows whose hooves are trimmed too short or in a rough manner can have just as many problems as cows whose feet aren't trimmed. Ideally, farmers should keep records of hoof trimming so that they can see if patterns develop in specific seasons of the year, with particular feed ingredients or for certain cows.

At the same time physical issues with hooves are being addressed, Kauf says producers should be working with their nutritionist to monitor overall rumen health. A correctly formulated ration -- containing the proper levels of starch and fiber -- will produce a healthy rumen that is not prone to acidosis.

Acidosis is often the culprit when cows begin having hoof problems in the summer heat. Cows stressed by hot conditions can develop a lower rumen pH. Researchers believe the acid conditions in the rumen cause it to release toxins, which lower the integrity of the hoof. This leads to increased claw lesions.

Heifers can be especially susceptible to acidosis and resultant claw problems. When first-calf heifers are initially brought into the milking string, older cows may not allow them any room at the bunk. Heifers will avoid the bullying cows and feed later, often overeating. This imbalance in their diet can result in acidosis. The same problems can occur when heifer groups are overcrowded.

Research in Wisconsin and Florida shows that lameness often peaks at the end of the summer.

Kauf says he has had success using Zinpro's complex trace mineral package to help his clients combat acidosis and maintain the condition of their herd's hooves.

LOCOMOTION SCORING

Cows That Don't Move Well Cost You Milk and Money

When you watch your cows walk, what do you see? Do you differentiate between the cows that walk well and those that don't? Do you note animals who are starting to have foot trouble? And if you do, do you make a point of getting to the bottom of that trouble before a sore claw or a hurt heel becomes a full-fledged case of laminitis?

Locomotion Scoring is an easy way to evaluate every animal on your farm so that you can monitor her hoof health on a regular basis.

Animals are studied as they walk and then assigned a score on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being "Normal" and 5 being "Severely Lamé." There are telltale signs – such as an arched back – that will support your scoring.

Originally developed to measure how hoof health affects reproduction, Zinpro Performance Minerals now offers locomotion scoring resources so that producers can determine the long-term economic effects of the milk loss, reproductive problems and veterinary expenses associated with laminitis.

Studies have shown that a cow that scores a 3 – or "Moderately lame" -- may have a milk loss of 5.1 percent due to her hoof problems. If you leave those problems untended and let that cow become a 4, milk loss jumps to 16.8 percent. An animal that's score is 5 has an even larger milk loss – 36 percent.

Steve Wolfgang, Mid Atlantic District Manager for Zinpro, says there is only a 30-day window before a cow scored as a 3 becomes a 4 or even a 5. "Then you're starting to lose a dramatic amount of milk," Wolfgang notes.

Wolfgang says the beauty of the locomotion scoring system is that producers can adapt it for their own needs. He knows dairymen who have simplified the system to three points: 1 – "Good Cow", 2 – "Watch List" and 3 – "See the Trimmer".

The key is to use the system every week. If you don't have time, train someone on your staff and make sure they follow through with this weekly assignment.

It's also a good idea to have someone who's not on your farm on a regular basis locomotion score your cows and then compare results. Often, it takes an outside set of eyes to recognize the scope of a laminitis problem.

"All dairymen think their lameness is less than it is," Wolfgang says. "There's always an excuse for every cow and why she's limping. The limping cow then becomes what the farmer sees as normal."

The goal is of locomotion scoring to identify foot problems, record them to look for patterns and then find a solution, he says.

"The great thing is that you can just pick a point in time to go out and say 'I'm going to locomotion score.' You can see where your herd is at and it helps you get on top of any problems."

Zinpro offers an instructional CD on locomotion scoring as well as an identification poster of claw lesions. Both are available in English and Spanish. Talk to your Agri-Basics nutritionist to get your free copies.
