

EMPIRE FARM DAYS 2016

By Chris Galen

FARM Program changes highlight improvements in animal care

Anyone listening to the latest news from dozens of food companies knows that more attention is being given to the sourcing of different foods, including the conditions under which livestock are housed and raised. As consumer interest and customer expectations grow, we need to have a uniform, national standard for the US dairy sector that accomplishes two goals: developing best practices and measure how we're doing at meeting those protocols; and encouraging farmers to improve on those practices as we learn from each other about ways to continually enhance animal care.

Since 2009, the National Milk Producers Federation, working with Dairy Management Inc., has managed the dairy industry's animal care program, Farmers Assuring Responsible Management (FARM). The program helps dem-

The FARM Program reflects ongoing changes and consumer expectations for how animals are cared for.

onstrate to our customers the commitment farmers make every day to providing a high level of animal care and milk quality.

Earlier this spring, NMPF's Board of Directors approved a series of recommendations to the third and latest version of the FARM Program, which is now being rolled out to the 92 cooperatives and processors that use the program with their farmer-suppliers. The changes were recommended by both the FARM Technical Writing Group (comprising farmers, veterinarians, co-op

staff and animal care experts) and the farmer-led Animal Health Committee at NMPF. Version 3.0 of FARM reflects research, data from past FARM Program evaluations on tens of thousands of farms, and feedback from dairy buyers and their consumers.

Though the revised guidelines won't begin to be used until January 1, 2017, the FARM Program is providing farmers



– and those who work with them – all the resources, tools and training opportunities needed to follow the new standards. Many resources, including a summary of the changes, sample forms and protocols, and employee training tools, are already available on the FARM website: www.nationaldairy-farm.com

Specifically, the newest version of the FARM Program includes several criteria that will receive enhanced focus. These include: 1) having a Veterinarian-Client Patient Relationship (VCPR), 2) maintaining documented employee training records, 3) developing protocols on critical animal care procedures such as euthanasia and non-ambulatory cattle movement, and 4) ending routine tail docking. While these evaluation points have always been part of the FARM Program, they will receive greater focus in Version 3.0.

Customers are looking for evidence of the collaboration between farmers and veterinary practitioners. Putting a strong emphasis on the VCPR allows us to answer customer questions about whether best practices are being implemented within that collaboration. The same notion applies to the need to document how employees are trained on farms, as this removes the possibility that not everyone working on a farm is in sync with management's expectations about animal care.

The tail docking issue is a sensitive one, but Version 3.0 provision is really just an acceleration of an existing FARM Program expectation that the practice needs to end. The research is clear that tail docking is not effective in promoting animal care or milk quality. Most farms, about 75%, don't rely on docking anymore, and with switch trimming a viable alternative – and with dairy customers watching this area very intently – we need to be proactive in addressing the issue.

The FARM Program helps quantify the great story we have to tell about animal care. One of its goals is to be the only animal care program for dairy, greatly reducing the confusion and hassles for farmers who might otherwise have to comply with numerous expectations from different dairy buyers. With the continuous improvement essential to the FARM Program, the dairy industry will continue to be a leader in demonstrating commitment to animal care. □

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