

NAVAN VETERINARY SERVICES – JUNE 2015 NEWSLETTER

At a recent conference on Sustainability of the Dairy Industry, the focus was on three important aspects that define sustainability in most food sectors.

- 1) Environment
- 2) Social
- 3) Economics

A sustainable dairy industry must be environmentally friendly. This has been addressed at the Producer level for some time, with manure management plans, environmental farm plans, conservation tilling etc. Recently “carbon footprint” awareness at the processor level and most larger industries has also become increasingly important. An industry that is sustainable must be economically viable to all stakeholders, including producer, processor and retailer. This ties in with social responsibility and accountability, which is the main focus of this newsletter. Socially acceptable practices in dairy farming (animal husbandry & environmental stewardship) seem to be on the radar more often in recent years.

In this era of “food plenty” for large portions of the population, particularly in this part of the world, consumers have the luxury of having input into how the “dairy products” they are purchasing are delivered to the market.

Large retailers and food chains are extremely sensitive to criticism and concerns of the public and they are quick to react (e.g. the recent Saputo and the Chilliwack Cattle incident). When companies like Tim Hortons (account for almost 80% of coffee sales in Canada) and Loblaw’s (largest food retailer in Canada) feel the need to be proactive in animal welfare issues, they get the attention of marketing boards and cooperatives. We as producers & veterinarians in this industry need to take a close look at all of our current practices and to be able to justify them either scientifically or morally. As much effort as there has been over the years in addressing lameness in dairy cows, the average farm in Canada still has approx. 30% of cows lame. (Grades I, II or III). Even though in a survey of dairy producers across several provinces in western Canada, most thought their occurrence was around 10-15%. There is a disconnect between what we observe as normal and what is abnormal.

Justifying tail docking to help “keep cows clean & reduce mastitis” is difficult to support without scientific evidence to help its defense. Dehorning calves (a painful procedure) without analgesics (local block with lidocaine +/- sedation and pain medications afterwards) is also difficult to defend. Because we have the ability to make this a non-painful procedure, we should. The Pro-Action initiative that we will all be seeing more of is going to address many of the Standards of Dairy Practice guidelines that has been sitting on a dusty shelf somewhere in most barns.

Giving calves the ability to stand up, lay down and turn around to exhibit natural behaviors and see other calves is soon to be mandated. The health benefits of this are well researched and can be a topic for another day.

Sustainability of the dairy industry is something very achievable. Environmentally sound decisions, and socially acceptable practices can work to keep this industry economically viable for all involved.

