



DAIRY CATTLE REPRODUCTION COUNCIL

Top 10 places successful reproductive managers focus their time

Successful reproductive managers have only so many hours everyday to accomplish a multitude of tasks. We have highlighted 10 areas that successful reproductive managers spend their time perfecting and how other producers can make the same adjustments to their herd.

1. **The numbers.** These astute managers know the numbers that represent their herd: pregnancy rate, heat detection rate, conception rate, age at first calving, days open and many more. They know their current numbers and, even if they're really good, they have a plan in place to improve them.
2. **Heat detection.** You can't breed cows if you don't know when they're in heat. These managers have a handle on which heat detection methods are successful in their herd.
3. **Nutrition.** The ration affects how well cows perform reproductively, and these managers know that the relationship between feed and pregnancy is an important one.
4. **Employee training.** Not all reproductive managers will spend their whole day watching cows, but they know who will be. Employees are involved with the day-to-day activities with the herd, so training is vital.
5. **Cow comfort.** Cows experiencing stress will suffer reproductively and successful managers minimize these stressors to keep cows performing at their peak.
6. **Heifer raising.** Reproductive success starts long before cows enter the milking string, so successful managers pay attention to heifer health and rearing.
7. **New technologies, new information.** The dairy industry is always changing and successful managers stay up-to-date with the latest research and technology.
8. **Other success stories.** Dairy producers often share their success stories, and strong managers learn from others. By paying attention to other's stories, evolving producers learn about where changes can be made on their own farm.
9. **What the experts are saying.** Veterinarians, nutritionists, extension specialists ... the list goes on and on of experts in the field. By meeting with these professionals, attending seminars and seeing other operations, successful managers are always willing to hear what the experts have to say.
10. **The bottom line.** Shrewd managers know how well their reproductive program has to work to be profitable. By knowing their financial situation, these managers know where they can take risks and make improvements, and where they should focus their financial efforts.



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- 1. The numbers.** Successful reproductive managers know the facts, rather than trying to estimate. They record all of the reproductive information so they can calculate important herd averages, such as services per conception, pregnancy rate, days open and days to first service. Once they have the numbers, their job is just beginning—now it's time to put a plan into action that will help their herd achieve even higher goals. Even when their current numbers are exceptional, successful managers want to reach even higher and achieve even more. Here are some reproductive goals that top producers focus on meeting and exceeding:

Reproductive area	Goal
1st Service Conception Rate	≥ 50%
Pregnancy Rate	≥ 20%
Days Open	< 100 days
Calving Interval	12 – 13 months
Days to First Service	< 75 days
Heat Detection Rate	≥ 71%
Services/Conception	< 1.8

The first step to improving your reproductive program is to define your starting place. Anyone can guess at success, but actually putting a value with the reproductive program will give you a place to start. From there you can set goals to improve your current reproductive program.

- 2. Heat detection.** It's impossible to get cows bred without knowing which cows are in heat. Good managers focus on finding cows in heat and getting them bred when the time is right. There are many different heat detection methods that herds utilize, and successful managers choose those that work best for their operation.

The surest sign that a cow is in heat is to actually see her stand to be mounted. But in the busy lifestyles that many dairymen have today, watching the cows all day is not always possible. Many dairies have personnel responsible for watching for heats every morning and night for about an hour each session. If this is what you prefer, have posted standard operating procedures (SOPs) so that employees know what signs to look for, what they should do if they think an animal is in heat and who they should report any suspected heats to.

If you rely on heat detection devices, such as pedometers, tail chalking and heatmount detectors, remember to look for visual signs after you've identified cows you think may be in heat. Even though technology has helped to improve heat detection ability, sometimes cows aren't actually in heat and technology doesn't always perform as it should. Look for signs of heat such as decreased dry matter intake (DMI), standing to be ridden, increased walking, a swollen vulva or restless and unusual behavior.



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- 3. Nutrition.** Everyday we are learning more about how feeding programs are impacting reproduction on dairy farms. Rather than focusing solely on reproduction, leading managers realize that the ration has just as big of an impact as heat detection and cow comfort. If the ration provides too much energy, cows will become fat and conception rates will decline. On the other hand, if cows are energy deficient, they will spend more energy on maintenance rather than on reproductive performance. The fine balance between too little and too much energy is where successful reproductive managers will find their ration.

Don't forget about protein levels, as unbalanced levels can have adverse effects on reproduction. Also, research is showing that vitamin and mineral deficiencies can increase the chances of calving disorders and reduced conception rates.

- 4. Employee training.** Busy managers may not always be the ones looking after the cows every day, but they are always in contact with the people who are. Employees can make all the difference when it comes to caring for heifers and fresh cows, identifying cows in heat and breeding cows. Managers have to trust that their employees are doing what they are asking them to and ensure their employees have all the tools they need by:

- **Posting protocols.** What should employees do if you're not around and they have questions? Posting protocols of how cows should be handled if they are in heat, calving or become sick can help employees continue their tasks when you're not available.
- **Providing Training.** Breeder training and refresher courses ensure that you and your employees are on the same page when it comes to getting cows pregnant. Reminders of proper technique can eliminate any poor habits your breeders have picked up from other employees or previous jobs.
- **Offering Incentives.** Many managers offer incentives to ensure that their employees are taking these important tasks seriously. Set goals for your employees and reward them when they are reached. These goals could range from improved pregnancy rate to cows detected in heat.
- **Making them part of the team.** Employees are more likely to improve their work habits if they know their position matters. If you are having troubles with your reproduction program, ask for their opinion and what they think could be done for improvement.

- 5. Cow comfort.** Stress can have many negative effects on cows, and hindering reproductive performance is one of them. There are plenty of environmental stressors that can negatively affect cows in their normal day-to-day routine, like overcrowding, poor ventilation, poor footing, uncomfortable stalls and rough handling. In extremely stressful situations, dry matter intake (DMI), milk production and, eventually, reproduction are compromised as animals spend available energy attempting to remove themselves from the situation.



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To ensure cow comfort for your herd, focus on the following areas, which can all positively impact reproductive performance:

- **Comfortable stalls.** Cows will spend more time lying down if the stalls are comfortable, which can lead to higher milk production and improved health. They will also spend less time on their feet, which can be beneficial for hoof health.
- **Proper footing.** You can detect more cows in heat because they will stand to be ridden and jump on other animals that are in heat.
- **Proper space for everyone.** Stocking density can be a problem when cow numbers are too high. Research has shown that stocking rates above 110 percent have adverse effects on lactating cows, especially fresh and young cows. And these are the cows we are focusing on—fresh cows need to get rebred and young cows that will be a part of the lactating herd for a long time to come.

6. **Heifer raising.** Reproductive success starts long before the two-year-old enters the milking string. Although top managers know fresh cows are important, they also know that the road to a successful reproduction program starts long before maternity.

The ration is key to reproduction when it comes to heifers. Fat heifers have trouble getting bred while energy-deficient heifers may not show signs of estrus. Much like the lactating herd, ration plays a large role in getting heifers bred. Focus on nutrition and heifer rearing so heifers are ready to be bred between 13 and 15 months.

7. **New technologies, new information.** The dairy industry is ever-changing and top managers know they must change to stay a part of it. To learn about new technologies in the industry, smart managers read publications, meet with industry specialists and attend trade shows and conferences to learn more about what's really going. Getting off the farm may be a hard task, but there's a lot to learn when you get the chance.
8. **Other success stories.** Astute reproductive managers have a great story to tell about how their program works, and they know that other producers do, too. Successful managers aren't afraid to hear how others are making changes on their farms and how their reproduction rates are improving, and to implement change if they see an idea that can work for their operation.

Visit other farms and take advantage of the wealth of knowledge others producers possess. With so many different ways to run a successful reproductive program, there's no one right answer. Form alliances with others, as another perspective can help when you're troubleshooting problems and making changes on your own farm.

9. **What the experts are saying.** Excellent reproductive managers listen intently to what the best in the business have to say. They consult with nutritionists, veterinarians, extension specialists and sales representatives. They ask good questions that can improve their current operation. By fully engaging, these top producers set their operation in the right direction by getting the facts.



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Many successful managers lean heavily on the knowledge that outside sources share. Consultants visiting the farm have a very different perspective and may identify problems that you missed. You spend everyday on your farm while professionals see a wide range of dairies on a daily basis.

10. The bottom line. Reproductive performance has significant financial implications. Operations with poor reproductive programs suffer from money they never see and additional expenditures spent on fixing reproductive challenges. Below is a list of the cost for producers if goals are not met.

- Excessive days open: \$2 – \$5/day
- Services/conception: An additional \$1.5 for every 0.1 above 1.8
- Heat detection: One missed heat could cost \$42 to \$105 per cow

By recognizing the financial implications, top producers know that a poor reproductive program affects the success of the whole operation. The effects of money lost come in the form of profits never seen. For example, feeding an open cow for 21 more days when she's not pregnant can be a large expense. Now think of what it's costing you for feed alone, not to mention the lost milk production. The program is only magnified more if the heat detection program suffers severely. By putting financial numbers with what you're losing, it will help you see the added benefits of improving reproduction.

As you can tell, there are many different activities that fill up the time of astute reproductive managers. By balancing their time and managing the people who have direct contact with the animals, these managers are able to oversee and run a successful operation. You, too, can experience the same success by focusing on these 10 areas.