

Are You and Your Livestock Ready for Summer?

By Dr. Brian Reed DVM, MBA

The recent rains, wind and increasing day lengths appear to have put winter into the rear-view mirror for southeastern Pennsylvania. As I write this, all the signs of spring have arrived and, as we await a few degrees of temperature, summer won't be far behind. It's time to consider what you need to do now to make sure you are prepared on your dairy farm for the things that come along with summer. It is better to be prepared ahead of time than try to scramble to meet summer's challenges when they hit. The health, comfort and productivity of your animals depend on it.

As the grass greens up, many dairy farms turn heifers out on pasture, depending on their farm's land resources. Depending on your handling facilities for animals when on pasture, you may want to bring them current on their vaccinations and either deworm them or at least plan for parasite control throughout the pasture season. There are more choices for parasite control now than in the past. You may want to consider sustained control products, especially if you have difficulty catching your animals while on pasture. Other farms may choose to use pour-on type of products or feed grade products timed strategically through the pasture season. The important thing is to plan for it now, so you keep your replacements growing optimally and efficiently throughout the season. I have learned that the best deworming program for any given farm is the one that actually gets done when it should. Work with your veterinarian to develop a program that will work for you and your situation.

With the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) now being confirmed in dairy herds in seven states as of this writing, enhancing biosecurity on your dairy operation is more important than ever. According to the USDA and partners, HPAI is primarily spread by birds to animals and will spread on farms by people carrying matter from infected birds — such as dust, dander, and bird droppings — on their clothing, gloves, soles of their shoes, vehicle tires, animal trailers and other equipment, in addition to contaminated water. Keeping your equipment, clothing and footwear clean helps protect cattle from many viruses. You can also consider fencing off your ponds or waterway areas to keep them separated from wild fowl as much as possible.

It is also time to think about about your ventilation and animal cooling systems. Do you have optimal fans, sprinklers and free choice water for all your groups of animals? Make sure you think about all your livestock, not just the lactating herd. This is the time of year to think about upgrading your animal comfort systems before the hot, humid weather hits, which we know it will at some point! Make any new installations now, so they are functioning already when you need them. You may find your existing systems need some maintenance done on them to allow for peak performance. Don't be surprised on the first 90-degree day when you find yourself fixing things when you would rather be doing other things. Your cows will thank you by maintaining their production better than they would otherwise.

Hopefully, you have a well-structured, consistent reproductive management program to get both your replacement heifers and your adult cows bred on time. Now is a great time to review

this program with your veterinarian or step it up a bit over the next couple months before the hottest weather hits. It's generally a lot easier to get cows bred now than during July and August due to heat stress that can occur in our climate. Every cow you get bred now is one you don't have to worry about then.

One last consideration to think about now are your feed inventories. We are 5-6 months away from silo filling time. At your current rate of feeding, are your inventories going to meet your needs for your current ration? If not, how are you going to deal with that? Your cropping strategies are probably set by now, but are there things you can still consider to help? Are you able to store enough forages so you have some carryover of fermented feeds in the fall? Maybe this is the year you should plan for increasing your storage capacities for this fall's crops. Those installations need to be planned now. Also, your planting decisions might need to be changed.

Summer will be here before we know it. Once you get involved with the spring crop work, it seems like time just flies. Try to do as much planning ahead of time so things go well for you. As you, your family and employees put in long hours this coming season, please make sure you stress, preach and live safety for everyone's sake! Cutting corners costs lives.