

Doing the Right Thing, Even When No One Is Watching

By Brian Reed DVM, MBA

As a practicing dairy veterinarian, I have been asked to review and sign off on many FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) Program booklets and management practices over the last few months. This program was designed to assure consumers that the dairy products they enjoy have been produced on farms that demonstrate the highest standards of animal care and responsibility. The overall program is divided into 5 focus areas. These areas are animal care, environment, antibiotics, workforce development and biosecurity. When considering these major areas of focus, it is hard to disagree with any of these areas being important for a dairy farm to focus on and do a good job with.

Sometimes, I hear some negative feedback from my clients feeling that they shouldn't have to do this paperwork. It may be that they feel they are being accused of doing a bad job on their management. Others may share they just don't like "big brother" looking over their shoulder all the time and this is just a flashpoint for that feeling. I have also heard that it seems like the program is written for large farms and doesn't seem to be relevant for them. I appreciate my clients that I have visited for many years or decades openly sharing their concerns with me. It is this open dialogue that allows us to have meaningful conversations and productive relationships over time to help improve their farming operations.

While reviewing their FARM Program booklet, our conversations often find some areas of potential improvement to better assure consumers. Some suggestions may also improve the care of their animals or lessen their risk of mistakes happening on the farm that might cost them money. These areas may relate to their record keeping systems, the way they are treating sick animals, or the care animals are receiving in certain situations. Nobody is perfect! Reviewing the way things are done on a periodic basis allows for improvement to occur over time. The FARM standards move forward somewhat with each version that comes out. This just reflects how expectations of consumers and norms in our society change over time.

C.S. Lewis is attributed with the quote "Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching." I think this definition and understanding relates to the concerns of having to sign off on the FARM Program booklet for my dairy clients. I know the overwhelming majority of dairy producers have impeccable integrity and do the best they can for their animals, their employees and their farm. It may bother them that they have to "prove" it to someone by filling out paperwork. They may take it as questioning their integrity. I look at it slightly different. I consider it getting credit for what you are already doing. It shows the pride and hard work that you put forward in operating your dairy farm every day. Collectively, the dairy industry is getting credit for the work they are doing and giving that assurance to the consuming public. You show that every day when you make responsible decisions about sick animal treatments and records, handling of down cows, decisions on transport to market and

euthanasia situations. These are tough decisions for every dairy farm. I have confidence you make them with the utmost of integrity, and the FARM Program helps the dairy industry provide this assurance to our consumers.