

# “Value added veterinarians”: The future of veterinary services in direct farm marketing

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## Abstract

Value-added dairies are dairies that add value to their milk by marketing their own dairy products directly to the consumer. Value-added dairies require considerably more services to operate than traditional dairies, because they have expanded their business beyond milk production to include processing, marketing and more. Services needed by value-added dairies can be both in traditional veterinary service areas and in non-traditional veterinary service areas. We will discuss how veterinarians can provide service and add value to these dairies.

**Key words:** dairy, veterinary services, value added

## Résumé

Les fermes laitières à valeur ajoutée sont des fermes laitières qui rajoutent de la valeur à leur lait en permettant aux consommateurs d'acheter directement leurs propres produits laitiers. Les fermes laitière à valeur ajoutée exigent beaucoup plus de services pour leur opération que les fermes laitières traditionnelles car elles ne se limitent plus à la simple production de lait et s'impliquent en particulier dans la transformation et la mise en marché. Les services que nécessitent les fermes laitières à valeur ajoutée se retrouvent aussi bien dans les domaines de services vétérinaires traditionnels que non-traditionnels. Nous allons voir comment les vétérinaires peuvent fournir ces services et rajouter de la valeur aux fermes laitières.

## Introduction

When a dairy is direct marketing, the milk used for the value-added products comes from that dairy. The extreme importance of milk quality is soon realized. Raw-milk quality is the single most important factor in determining finished-product quality. Raw-milk quality can greatly affect finished-product quality, especially taste and shelf life. Direct farm marketing dairies can no longer accept anything less than excellent raw-milk quality. Providing excellent quality value-added products to the consumer is one of the keys to the success of the dairy.

## Providing Value-Added Services

Veterinarians, because of our backgrounds in bacteriology, biosecurity, and protocol development, can offer quality control services to value-added dairies on the raw milk side, on the processing side, for the finished product, and the handling of the finished products. A comprehensive mastitis control and prevention plan should be established for the value-added dairy to ensure the highest-quality raw milk is produced for processing. In addition, a milk culturing lab for a value-added dairy should be maintained either on the farm or be provided by the veterinarian. The establishment of a milk culturing lab is not difficult or expensive. We followed the recommendations of Dr. Jerry Roberson in setting up a milk culturing lab at our veterinary clinic. Results from milk culturing can determine whether the mastitis is contagious or environmental so that appropriate action can be taken.

Somatic cell count, standard plate count, lab pasteurization count, preliminary incubation count and *E. coli* count are all important for raw milk quality, and are parameters that should be continually monitored. In addition, all raw milk is tested prior to being processed for the presence of certain antibiotics by an approved antibiotic detection test. The most commonly used tests are the Delvo-P and the Charm II. Veterinarians can assist with testing procedures and on all farm residue avoidance protocols, including aflatoxin.

Veterinarians may have clients wanting to transition to direct farm marketing, and need consultation for facility design of the raw milk area and the processing facility. Biosecurity procedures can be established to clearly separate the raw milk side from the processing side by the veterinarian.

Value-added dairies require quality control programs for the processing of their products and for the finished product itself. Creameries use similar chemicals (at higher concentrations) for sanitizing and cleaning of processing equipment, based on time and temperature, as dairies do. Veterinarians can establish and troubleshoot quality control programs for the processing of on-farm dairy products.

Constant monitoring of finished dairy product quality is crucial to the success of a value-added dairy. The value-added dairy needs to know the quality of their finished products before they are distributed. It

is important to track the aerobic bacteria plate count and the *E. coli* bacteria count of the finished product before the product is marketed. Marketing low-quality products, products with short shelf-life or products containing pathogens can be devastating for a value-added dairy. The lab for the testing of finished products can be separate from the milk culturing lab or the same. We use 3M Petrifilm Coliform and Aerobic count plate for the bacterial testing of our finished products.

Balancing the supply of milk (raw milk) on the farm with the demand of milk to be processed is the biggest challenge value-added dairies faced. What do you do with excess milk and what do you do when you don't have enough milk? The most difficult time for us to produce enough milk to meet the demand for our dairy products is during the heat of the summer. Conversely, if we have any excess milk at all, it will be in the winter or during spring flush. It is much better to have an excess of milk than a deficit.

Strategies that can be tailored by veterinarians to be used to improve a milk deficit include: heat stress management, fine-tuning nutrition, buying cows, leasing cows, and strategic breeding/freshening. Strategies for milk surplus on our dairy, since it happens so seldom, is strategic culling or to separate the cream off any excess milk and dump the excess skim milk.

Some of the questions we get from consumers give us clues as to areas veterinarians can consult value-added dairies.

Here are a few of the common questions we get from our customers and farm tour participants.

- Are you Organic?
- Does your milk have antibiotics in it?
- Do you inject your cows with hormones?
- How do you treat your animals?
- What do you do with the baby calves?

- What do you feed your cows?
- Do you feed your cows GMO's?
- Is your milk raw?

Many of the questions asked are because the consumer is uneducated about production practices, but the message is clear—consumers are concerned about what the cows are given, what the cows eat, and how the cows and calves are treated.

All farms should have a biosecurity plan. Dairies offering farm tours need to protect dairy visitors from farm pathogens, as well as protect their farm from disease introduction by visitors. Veterinarians should develop biosecurity plans for value-added dairies, especially those dairies conducting farm tours.

### Conclusion

Veterinarians are uniquely qualified and trained to provide many of the services required by value-added dairies. Value-added dairies need all the traditional herd health veterinary services, plus consultation in some non-traditional service areas too. Non-traditional veterinary service areas include quality control programs (raw milk and finished product), biosecurity plans, facility design, pharmaceutical use, and animal welfare. Veterinarians willing to offer these services can add value to their services and become value-added veterinarians. The end result may be more dairies and dairy veterinary practices that are sustainable.

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