

What the Producer Expects from His Veterinarian

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A little bit about what we are doing so you can have a basis to understand our present veterinary needs and services. Currently, the milking herd at White Plains Ranch consists of 395 registered Jerseys, plus an additional inventory of some 200 young animals from calves all the way up to bred heifers. Now, within the past year the milking herd has been as large as 480 head with an additional 450 head of young animals. The explanation for the reduced numbers is that we have a successful contract for the second period of the dairy termination program, commonly referred to as the buy-out program, or if you are from California or any of the western states, it's the cow-kill program. To date we have accelerated our culling rate only slightly. We have been successful in exporting almost 400 head to South American countries. Three more shipments are being developed at the present time, and this could affect over 200 more head of our herd. White Plains Ranch includes 1,770 acres, of which 1,350 acres are used for pasture, hay, and crop land, 350 acres are occupied with a managed timber stand, and the balance is consumed with buildings, lots, roads, streams, ponds, and a few acres that just hold the world together. There are eight full-time and two part-time employees. Incidentally, our newest employee has been with us five years. We grow all of our hay and silage for the herd, and in normal years we have extra to sell for cash crops, along with wheat and soybeans.

Our last official Jersey Cattle Club lactation herd average was slightly over 12,000 pounds of milk, 608 pounds of fat, and a 3.9 percent protein. The calving interval varies within a range of 12.6 to 13 months, days open from 108 to 118 days, breeding per conception, 1.4 to 1.7, first service conceptions in the range of 50-54%. We have had a calf mortality rate of 5% or less for 10 consecutive years. For the past ten years we have enjoyed a cooperative arrangement with the University of Georgia School of Veterinary Medicine, where twice each month a staff veterinarian and four or five senior students visit our farm to perform complete herd health examinations. The visits are planned in advance so our own routine veterinary work can be accomplished along with any emergencies that might exist at the time of their visit. Time is scheduled in a way that hands-on involvement and on-the-spot instruction can be given to each student, usually without the staff member or the student being rushed. During these visits the veterinary team gets priority use of our labor force and our facilities. The relationship with the University of Georgia has been most enjoyable and beneficial for us, and hopefully for the students involved, but the biggest plus

for this endeavor has been the opportunity to work with some dedicated professionals like Dr. Tom McDaniel, John McCormick, Dr. D. M. Blackman, and Dr. Fred Troutt. These are personal friends as well as business associates. The Georgia team has time to handle about 80% of our reproductive work, including examination and treatment, if necessary, of every fresh cow at least once before first service. Dr. Jack Whittaker visits the herd on a bi-monthly schedule to keep us current on pregnancy checks and prescribes treatment for some problem cases that the Georgia veterinary team does not have a chance to deal with.

The Georgia team designs and schedules our complete vaccination program, including our young stock. Drs. McDaniel and McCormick provide us with observations and recommendations on nutrition and sanitation problems. They help guide our dairy labor force on treatment techniques, equipment care, and maintenance. These two men have exceptional cow sense and a thorough understanding of all aspects of dairy herd management which qualifies them to identify developing problems before they become emergencies. We encourage them to question our medical practices and challenge any and all of our procedures. Let me assure you they do! Dr. George Copeland is our local veterinarian. He's a Georgia graduate who prefers large animal to small animal work, even though he is in a mixed practice. He does most of our surgery and handles all of our emergency situations. He is our supply source for vaccines, medication, and many dairy supplies. Dr. Copeland has a close working relationship with the veterinary staff at the University of Georgia and with the staff at our state diagnostic laboratory. He is also well respected and well received by the federal veterinarian in our state. Because of his contacts and his experience, Dr. Copeland has been invaluable to us over the years in the export activities of our purebred animals. This is especially true now with our accelerated export activity as a result of the dairy termination program. As you may know, health requirements are different in every importing country, and it is a time consuming, frustrating experience, dealing with several sets of requirements all at the same time.

I have identified three different sources of veterinary service that we work with on a regular basis. Ours is not a typical situation but it exists out of need, because ten years ago when we became affiliated with the University of Georgia we absolutely did not have available in our area of

the state the type veterinary service that we needed. You ask the logical question, could one veterinarian give us all the services that we now receive from three different areas? I guess the answer to that would be "yes, with some exceptions." Dr. Copeland could do most of the work, but he doesn't have the opportunity to examine enough cows in his area to become as proficient with pregnancy diagnosis and reproductive treatment as Dr. McDaniel, Dr. McCormick, and Dr. Whittaker. We would miss the continuing education benefits that are so valuable to me personally and to my dairy labor group as a result of the visits from the Georgia staff and citizens. We would sacrifice the relaxed atmosphere that exists in dealing with general herd management issues during the visits with the Georgia veterinary team. We would miss Dr. Whittaker's speed and accuracy in his experience in pregnancy diagnosis and treatment of reproductive problems. He is a specialist and will not allow himself to get involved in general herd health activities.

Now from that a concise description of what we expect from a veterinarian might be as follows: First, we would expect service when we need it within reason. We know our own limitations as far as treatment and herd health, and we try not to call out veterinarians for frivolous reasons. We try not to call him to correct our mistakes, and we don't call him to perform miracles! We expect our veterinarian to keep us well informed on new medicines, vaccines, techniques, and herd health practices that can make our business more profitable. We think he owes it to us to have for himself an on-going self-education, continuing education program. We expect our veterinarian to be open, frank, and honest with us, and we expect to deal with him in the same manner. We expect our veterinarian to understand our particular goals and priorities, and assistance with his involvement in every way that is possible. We expect him to charge us fair rates and make a good living and have his practice profitable, but not too profitable!

The things that we do **not** expect of our veterinarian: We do not expect him to have the answers for all problems. If there is not a need we don't expect him to be an expert in embryo transfer work. If there is not a need and he can't justify it, we don't expect him to be a computer expert. We do expect him to know sources that he can put us in touch with if we decide to pursue these activities. I suppose you can surmise from these expectations that we are willing and anxious to become dependent on our veterinarian for advice in as many areas as he feels comfortable and responsible.

Salesmen, researchers, and industry spokesmen sometimes become so infatuated with new ideas, new technology, and new gadgets that we are made to believe that all the basics in profitable milk production on all dairy farms have been satisfied. There is a difference in the way dairymen operate in different areas of the country and that is understandable because of the variations in climate, the differences in milk markets, the difference in dairy tradition, but we still have a large number of herds with poor heat detection plans,

poor levels of nutrition, poor or non-existent vaccination programs, excessive calving mortality rates, poor udder health on their milking age animals, and this may be the results of inadequate equipment, or maybe inadequate labor. We still have about 42% of the nation's dairy herds on DHIA official test. There is another 2 or 3% that have stand-alone computers and do their own test work on the farm. There will be 3 or 4 more percentage points of dairymen that have a private tester of some sort. Approximately 50% of the herds in this country have no test records that are of a reliable source to make management decisions in running their herds. The sophistication of the DHIM testing program today has reached such a stage in development that you can get most of your herd needs directly from your processing centers. Several of the centers now have terminal systems where you can direct access their entire computer bank and develop programs of your own and fill all your needs.

In spite of this there are still half of the dairymen in this country that make management decisions without the basis of authentic facts. Now these producers are still in business, probably due to a small debt load that was achieved in prior years when the industry did not feel the economics pressure that we are feeling today. There are numerous circumstances to explain why some poorly managed herds survive and some better managed herds fail. One fact is sure and predictable. Basic management practices will improve dramatically in the next 2-5 years or there will be a dispersement. A health official in our state predicts that by reducing the somatic cell count limit from 1 1/2 million to 1 million, it will remove more milk from the market than the combined influence of the milk diversion program, the herd buy-out, and last year's drought. This may not be as much of an exaggeration as you might think. Some herds will be denied a market because they cannot consistently produce a quality product. Others will go out because of low production which results from having infected udders and high somatic cell counts. It appears to me that there will be an increasing number of herd owners who will seek to establish a regularly scheduled working arrangement with a large animal practitioner, qualified to advise them on herd health matters and management practices generally. I would expect to see some of the better managed herds go together to employ a veterinarian to work exclusively with a small number of clients in a reasonably small geographic area. The factors causing me to believe that you can expect an increased demand for your time and services is purely economic. Farm credit is tight. The tax reform law will not make livestock agriculture more attractive to outside investors. Agricultural equity is devalued and will continue to be devalued. Milk prices will continue to drop until commodity credit purchases of surplus products fall below the 5 million pound level. Price reductions are already authorized by the Secretary of Agriculture and they are already scheduled. It is predictable, based on the level of production today, that these price reductions will take place.

Some of the industry prognosticators believe that the support price will continue to decline until it reaches \$9.60 cwt. Now the price may not get that low, but my point is that as the price declines from the present level, marginal herds must find ways to compete or face the option of going out of business. Unfortunately, instead of pursuing the course of improved herd health, more production from fewer cows, and improved overall management practices, many will decide to produce more milk and milk more cows to take care of their reduced cash flow. The stage is set for us to do that because commodity prices are low. The prediction is they will continue to be low, cow prices are cheap, and the prediction is they will be cheap for awhile, so the quick, painless route, and the logic that many dairymen will apply to this economic pressure, is let's add more cows, use more of our feed and produce more milk, and this is self-defeating for the industry's problems. We have had an attempt at two quick fixes for the problems of the dairy industry. One was the milk diversion program, and the second one was the dairy termination program. I predicted last April 1 when the bids were announced and the contracts were signed that within 12 months the milk we moved from the market by the dairy termination program would be resupplied by those staying in the business and expanding to meet the pressures of agricultural economy. I am sure now I am going to be wrong. I think it is going to be restored in ten months. The rate of increased milk production today is just astounding. There will be no more quick fixes. There will be no quota system as we know it in Canada, at least as we know it in this administration. The philosophy of this administration is free market, supply and demand, and let the forces of economics control production.

I believe nothing will happen until the scheduled reduction in the support price for milk runs its full cycle. Then the industry will likely impose upon itself management controls of some sort, either with or without the blessing of government. The dairy lobby is powerful enough that if the industry agrees on a reasonable supply-management plan, it will get some endorsement from the federal government. You can be sure that this will not come quickly and it will come as a last resort. Unfortunately, too many dairymen across the country are using the excuse of building big bases for milk production to prepare themselves for the time that quotas are implemented. Well, the political leaders in

Washington just tell us absolutely that there will be no quotas like the Canadian quota system. Unlike the beef industry, we have some rays of light in the dairy industry. I think one of those would be the increased product disappearance that Dr. Hamm referred to, and part of that is a result of additional money being spent through the national dairy board for advertising, promotion and research. For the past two years, we have gained nearly seven percent in product disappearance, and it looks now that this year will add another 3.7 percent on product disappearance. Now understand that this comes after a period of time when product disappearance was on the negative side. Four years ago we broke about even, but prior to that product disappearance was on the negative side, thus the surplus situation that developed during that period of time. Had we not been dealing with such an outrageous surplus problem, this increase of 7 percent product disappearance in the last couple of years would be a phenomenal success story. It is still a phenomenal success story, but it is overshadowed by overproduction to the point that it is having minimum impact. If this continues, we can see a ray of hope there that the price of milk can increase because of greater use per capita consumption and increased product disappearance.

I believe the economic pressures on livestock agriculture will bring about quick and increased demand for the services of bovine practitioners. You'll likely be dealing with some new clients that have never had a close working relationship with a veterinarian before. You will be working more with the basics of good dairy herd management instead of working with large numbers of people on computer technology or the other technical advances that our industry has seen. Depending on your present interest and your present involvement, you may realize a need to develop a level of management expertise in your practice that has not been required of you before. I see you as a needed resource and one that will be in greater demand in the coming months and years.

Now as a dairy producer, I want to speak to you for my fellow dairymen and thank you for your dedication, your professionalism, your patience in dealing with us, and your friendship.

*This paper was transcribed from a tape of the presentation:
Editor.*