What to do about downer cows?

Workshop looks at a question whose answer is more complex than ever.

by Hoard’s Dairyman staff

WHILE change is a constant part of dairy producers’ lives, its slow motion nature makes change easy to overlook, hard to measure, and almost impossible to pinpoint. But not always.

Today, producers can be sure that one of the biggest changes in how they manage some cows occurred on January 30, 2008. That was the day the Hoard’s Dairyman Dairy Cattle Welfare Workshop was held.

The tremendously practical program examined the causes of downer animals, handling techniques for non-ambulatory animals, including use of water flotation tanks, and the widespread opinion of cow managers that some downers are simply an unavoidable fact of life for anyone who owns cattle. Downer incidence rates have been estimated at 0.4 to 2.1 percent per year.

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Euthanasia specialist in Alberta, she emphasized. euthanasia – simply waiting for the animal to die – is inhumane,” Woods explained that safety is one of the biggest advantages of captive bolt guns, since they pose less of a health and liability hazard to employees and other animals than do firearms. Two downsides are that they require more precise use (physically touching the end of the barrel to a specific area on the animal’s forehead), and high quality units are fairly expensive. “You absolutely do get what you pay for,” she told the audience more than once. She emphasized that while captive bolt guns may do less physical damage than a free bullet, they are still highly effective at euthanizing animals quickly and reliably — if they are used correctly, if the right cartridge charge is used, and if they are properly maintained. Errors in any of these areas can result in euthanasia failure and additional suffering by the animal. Woods said the most frequent reasons for failure are inaccurate placement of the captive bolt gun, using a cartridge not made for that gun, or using an undersized charge. Guns come in different sizes (calibers) and each brand requires the specific cartridges that are made for it. “Do not interchange ammunition from one brand of gun to another,” she said firmly. She said it is also very important to use the right caliber and cartridge charge than do larger animals.

Jennifer Woods displays the key part of a dis-assembled captive bolt euthanasia gun, to give workshop participants a better understanding of exactly how they function.

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A.P. Mattos and his Sons Danny and Anthony (not pictured is their brother Ron), and Son-in-Law John Mendes, at A.P. Mattos & Sons Dairy #2 in Lemoore, California.

“When we decided to sell our two herds we weren’t planning to use a broker at all before we met Tim Souza at Pietersma & Company. We’re glad now that we did.

“Tim came by at about 5:30 on a Saturday night to introduce himself and talk. We told him what we wanted and he said that should be no problem. He called a buyer right there from the house and he came right out. By 10:30 the deal was made. The escrow papers came by FedEx a couple of days later and a week after that the cows went out. It all happened much faster than we expected. We thought it would take two months, but it was all done in 10 days.

“Tim is a great guy to work with. He basically bent over backwards to do everything we wanted. He’s a people person who puts everything right out front just the way it is. There were no ifs, ands or buts about it. Everything was clean-cut and went exactly the way he said it would.”

— A.P., Danny, Anthony and Ron Mattos, and John Mendes

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