



A make-it-work mentality

DURING a recently invited talk at a seed company's annual kickoff meeting, we dove into current industry trends. One discussion point was the challenging economic conditions. A participant asked a great question regarding dairy producer mindset and strategy: Are dairy producers more or less willing to try new or different strategies during challenging economic times?

This question set the stage for the next hour.

Ultimately, my sentiments are positive and upbeat regarding dairy producers given their prevailing "make-it-work" mentality I've witnessed on farms for many years. At the same time, I want to express that my heart goes out to those farming through this year's tough growing conditions and arduous economic conditions.

I can't fully grasp the emotional burden associated with the day-to-day farming stress during these challenging times; however, I can speak to the physical toll that stress takes upon a body after unexpectedly losing my dad a little over six years ago. If you feel stress is taking a grip, please look after yourself and stay close in communication with those you love. I, like many other industry professionals, am here for you in support. It may also be helpful to find mental or emotional diversions such as coaching youth, as was covered in the June 2023 *Hoard's Dairyman* issue on pages 310 and 311.

Find a better way

In my experience, dairy producers are continuously looking to make it work and are always exploring new or better ways to farm, regardless of

economic circumstances or growing conditions. In this vein, let's delve into different ways to make it work during challenging times. In no particular order, here are some experience-hardened areas we can work on.

Focus on what you can control. In 2023, much continues to be beyond your control. To the extent you're able, take pride and look for the positive in managing the factors that you can influence and try to avoid focusing on the uncontrollable economic or growing conditions. The power associated with positive energy is incredible.

While dairies across the U.S. are exposed to subpar economic conditions, the forward-thinking dairies will continue gaining production efficiency through these times. The efficiency gains then will carry over into better market conditions, and the balance sheet will forever benefit.

Cut feed costs with better nutrition data. One way to cut feed costs is to cut the fat . . . so to speak . . . using more precise and reliable moisture or nutrition data. Experience is showing that cows are slightly overfed with expensive purchased feed or nutrient supply due to nutrition data gaps. Having enough relevant data, captured over a meaningful period of time, is the first step to trim the fat and tighten up your herd's diet.

A meaningful period of time is to be determined by your farm and nutritionist. For some, it's within a week, and for others, it's over a month or two. Regardless of the time period, forward-thinking dairies are finding feed cost opportunities by capturing a bit more data in this time frame. A good place to start is with moisture.

Do not assume that the purchased and dry feed moisture contents in the library of your feed management software are accurate. Further, do not assume that moistures are consistent. Purchased feeds with one or two percentage units less moisture can equate to several hundred pounds in saved feed. Nutritionists formulate on a dry matter basis, so ensure you're feeding only what they're calling for and no more. I suspect you may find a few nickels and dimes here.

We can further tighten up diets by managing nutrition data like we do rifle shots at the range when sighting in a new scope on a rifle. Your dairy should interpret three to five observations from a meaningful period of time to help drive decisions. This likely equates to using a three-sample average or trend line to update moistures in feed management software or diets.

Historically, nutritionists have read the herd and integrated feed analysis data spanning several weeks to several months when balancing diets. Nutritionists are excellent in this regard; however, in many cases, there is a bit of buffer or wiggle room in diets or feed management software tied to limited nutrition data. In today's economy, there is no financial room for overage in expensive feeds or valuable nutrients like protein or starch. A bit more moisture and nutrition data, coupled with trend-based decisions, is a path toward precision nutrition.

Keep your cows in a position to succeed. While cutting back on overages and feed costs is immediately appealing to lessen expenditures, we also need to keep your herd in a position to succeed. Dairy

cows are not a production line, nor can they be turned on or off. Short-term decisions have long-term ramifications in health, reproduction, and even offspring performance. For example, a dam's plane of nutrition is known to affect the offspring's potential through epigenetic interactions. While economic conditions tempt trimming back, adhere to the feed ingredients rules of thumb as often outlined by the University of Illinois' Mike Hutjens. This will put your herd in a position to succeed when the economic tides turn.

Expand your network. Last, but not least, lean into others and expand your professional network outside the dairy industry. I think back to outstanding agribusiness insights gleaned from those in the swine and poultry industries, plant pathologists, or even from others such as car dealership owners. For example, I have a close friend outside of agriculture who has taught me a great deal about remaining positive, optimistic, and even about day-to-day decision making. If you expand your network beyond just those involved in agriculture, it's likely that you'll pick up a tip or two that will help streamline operations, improve efficiency, or just make you feel better. 🐮

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