

The Moo News

Newsletter of Penn Dutch Cow Care

June 2012

Hi Folks,

How many of us really register what we are looking at? In terms of cattle, what do you first notice? What do you see, hear, feel and smell? Do you use all your senses? Are you simply going through the motions and set in your routine that everything always seems fine just the way it is?

I spent an action-packed week in Holland in late May as part of a training course called Cow Signals, which is organized by a group of very practical Dutch dairy veterinarians. Their main focus is to create management systems which yield the healthiest possible cows, since healthy, happy cows produce the best milk - whether a pasture-based system, a free-stall system, a bedded pack system, or a tie-stall system. In any housing system, the six freedoms of pasture should be the standard to achieve when cows are inside. The six freedoms of pasture are feed, water, light, air, rest, and space. These factors create (or hinder) true health. To put this into action, we first need to be aware of how cows behave in a pasture system – their natural motions when grazing and how they position themselves when lying down to rest or as they get up, as well as the space, water, air and light to let cows do the things cows do when out on pasture. For instance, watch a cow rest while on pasture – often times they will have a front leg stretched in front of them. When they graze, they also eat with one foot forward. Can they do these things in the barn? These same sorts of abilities need to be provided with indoor stalls and at feed areas. Allowing good traction on walkways to allow her body to turn (instead of shuffle in short straight movements), allowing normal intake of water at drinking facilities, and having good air to allow deep breathing and proper lighting to see things should closely mimic life on pasture. This is because pasture is the most natural situation for a cow – and the Cow Signals team fully realizes this. I must say I haven't previously heard people relate the need so clearly for indoor facilities to reflect the freedoms of pasture life – a refreshing perspective. With proper pasture and barns the best possible milk production can occur because the cows are at their healthiest.

I initially became interested in this veterinary team by reading a book called "Cow Signals: The practical guide for dairy cow management" by Dr. Jan Hulsen, available through Hoard's Dairyman. The book and course (taught by Dr. Joep Driessen) are based on some simple questions: What do I see? How does this happen? What does this mean? Then, real solutions can be planned and action can be taken. The course allowed me to see many details of cows which I haven't looked for while treating individual sick animals with specialized organic medicines. For instance, seeing a bump on the front of both the shoulder blades, or a bump on the last rib or backbone, or a sore at the top of the neck, or missing

fur at the hock, or a lack of fur along the rear leg muscle – what might this mean? Whatever we can see and take note of can help us start to think about what the cause might be. This will identify risk areas which will need improvement for the herd to perform better. In the examples given above, the problem (and solution) has to do with size of stalls and/or amount of dry bedding. Once we become attuned to why something is happening, we can take action. The goal is that your cows will pay you back with more milk in the tank, show better signs of fertility, have stress free calving and much better starts to lactation.

Here is a real issue. When cows rise after lying down on pasture, they stretch, arch their back, drop manure, and then walk on. In all indoor systems, if the stalls are designed correctly, they should have the freedom to do the same. Electric trainers completely stop the natural motions of cows rising freely from a resting position. In free stall systems there are no trainers and in bedded pack systems there are also no trainers. And I have seen many tie-stall barns in various regions having no trainers either. I think part of the reason trainers are needed is due to pit manure systems and the mattresses that were created to accommodate such set ups – so that little to no bedding is used and therefore the cows must always be made to urinate and drop manure into the gutter itself. In free-stall systems and non-trainer systems, farmers regularly pull back wet bedding as needed. I certainly understand why trainers are needed, but then they should be used *only* as training devices and not turned on all the time. If they are off and the cow just feels the metal ridges it will make them move back (and save on electricity cost also). I've never understood why trainers are turned on during milking time – I am near certain that having them on during milking time reduces milk production due to the added stress of electro-magnetic fields.

As many of you know, when beginning to work on a cow my first question always is “are the trainers off?” Why? One time when checking a sick cow, I must have been touching against a metal pole while using my stethoscope on the cow. At some point, I guess my head must have touched the trainer, for next thing I know I instantly dropped to the ground after feeling a gunshot-like jolt to my head. I don't like to be shocked like that, plain and simple. Same for cows, I'd bet. Do animals always need to have something like that hovering inches above them? Keeping in mind the freedom of movement on pasture and that free-stalls and bedded packs don't ever use trainers (nor do any tie-stall farms in Quebec), use them as little as possible. What would milk customers think of such things?

There have been calls to eliminate tie-stalls in US certified organic production (it's already been done in Europe). Personally I will defend tie-stalls until the day I die, since personalized care and attention to cows can be maximized. I believe eliminating trainers from tie-stall systems will help fend off further calls to eliminate tie-stalls since every cow will still need a place to rest and lie down anyway. Keep in mind that the more freedom there is to lie down normally, stand up normally and stretch normally - like out on pasture - the better a cow's milk production will be.