Herd Management Software: Still one of the best tools to get your dairy to the next level of management

About 25 years ago, computer software for managing dairy records began showing up on personal computers in barns in the Northeast. Now, about 1 in every 4 Dairy One customers uses some form of software to manage their herd. The majority of these farms use Dairy Comp 305 or its sibling, Scout, which are developed by Valley Agricultural Software. The rest use PCDART from DRMS Raleigh, and a very small number use a variety other software programs.

Herd management software is an inexpensive tool that saves time, increases the likelihood that jobs get done correctly (compliance), and provides tools to evaluate changes. Let's take a look at some of the reasons why farm managers have turned to software use, and what is available for those who already use software.

Save time on herd health day

One of the questions we ask potential software users is "How long does it take to prepare for herd health day?" The answer varies, but it usually ranges from 20 minutes to 2 hours. Recently, a new customer shared that he used to spend at least 2 hours every Sunday afternoon poring over his breeding charts and previous herd health lists to get ready for a Monday morning herd health check. With herd management software, the herd health list is now waiting on the printer for him when he arrives at the barn in the morning. Assuming that herd health is done every other week, this customer saved 48 hours (4 hours x 12 months) each year on 1 task by using herd management software. The best part is that when configured properly, herd management software makes the list quickly and never misses a cow. Saving time is always welcome, but getting the job done correctly is where the profit is.

Milk and meat withholds

Proper care of sick cows, deciding which cows to treat, and when to return them to food production has a large impact on your dairy. Providing the proper treatment according to written protocols helps cows get better faster, allows you a basis to evaluate treatment methods, and protects the integrity of the milk and meat supply by avoiding drug residues. Conversely, improper treatment is expensive and makes it virtually impossible to evaluate the efficacy of a treatment. Many common treatment regimens cost $70 or more each day and the potential costs (time and money) of a drug residue violation are huge.

Implementing protocols and using the hospital list in Dairy Comp can make getting this correct much simpler. The first step is implementing protocols. Begin by meeting with your veterinarian and updating your treatment protocols, entering into the "Protocols" section of Dairy Comp 305. You will need to know the disease, the NADA number of the drug you will use to treat it, the duration of the treatment (in days), and the withdrawal periods for milk and meat. Now begin entering treatment events daily (e.g., Mastitis, Ketosis, DA). Dairy Comp will automatically set the milk withholding and meat withholding dates to the correct number of days for the product used. Finally, you add the hospital list to the task scheduler in Dairy Comp so it is automatically printed every morning. The example hospital list below includes:

A.   All of the cows that need to be treated
B.   What they are being treated for, and the product used
C.   What day of treatment they are on
D.   When the treatment ends (LTDAT)
E.   The milk (MKDAT) and meat (BFDAT) withhold dates
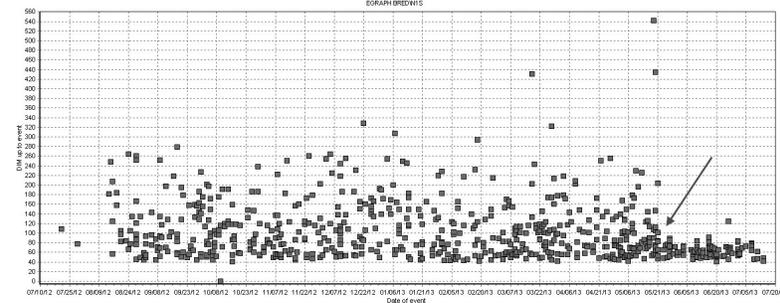F.   The pen each cow should be returned to at the end of treatment (PN)

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                            Hospital List
   ID    LTDAT    MKDAT    BFDAT    PN   ID REM
 =====  ========  ========  ========  ===  ===== ======================================
 22748   9/ 4/13  8/17/13   9/ 8/13   10  22748
     D                                            9/ 2 PNEU    EXNIMQQ    2:3
                     E          F           B
 22745   9/ 3/13   9/ 7/13   9/ 6/13    5  22745                                        C
                                                  8/30 MAST    SLC5 RF    5:5

 22435   9/ 3/13   9/ 7/13   9/14/13    1  22435
                                                  9/ 1 MAST    HET3 LR    3:3
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Find open cows

The cost of an open cow has been estimated at $3 to $5 per day. If we use $4 as an average, just one missed heat cycle of 20 days is $80! Running the "Cows expected in heat" list daily can aid in natural heat detection by providing the observer with a list of cows that are due to be in heat based on their previous breeding date. We can also create a list of cows that are over a specific days in milk (DIM) that have never been serviced to find animals who need attention. We were recently working with a new user adjusting his herd health list. This user knew his cows quite well, is a good manager, and was surprised when a cow came up on the list that was 100+ days in milk and had never been serviced. His eyes widened as he exclaimed, "That's not right!" He then started looking through his records and discovered that it indeed it was right. He had missed that animal through at least 2 heat cycles. That calculates to $180 ($4 per day times 45 days open). Finding that cow earlier would have paid at least 3 to 6 months of his software rental depending on which software he was using. That's just 1 cow!

Evaluate changes

Once herd management software is in place, we begin saving time and doing things the way we planned. The next benefit is being able to ask questions and be able to look at the data for answers. How am I doing at being compliant with my plan? How did performance change when my plan changed? Do I have cows that I should consider replacing with other cows? These are all questions that we can answer quickly from herd management software. Below is an example of a scatter graph created from Dairy Comp 305 showing the days in milk at first service for all cows in the herd over the past year. This farm's stated plan is to service cows by 80 days in milk. How are they doing at complying with this plan? Note that they made a change a few months ago.

How did performance change? The 21 day pregnancy risk report from Dairy Comp 305 provides us with a ready answer. The percentage of cows that were available to become pregnant that became pregnant in the most recent period after the change increased by 9 percent (PCT) and resulted in 17 more pregnant cows (Preg).

									21 day pregnancy risk|Wait Period 50
Date	Br Elig	Bred	Pct	Pg Elig	Preg	Pct	Aborts
4/07/13	97	31	32	96	24	25	1
4/28/13	132	68	52	127	26	20	2
5/19/13	146	94	64	140	38	27	2
6/09/13	155	101	65	153	55	36	0
6/30/13	139	66	47	* 116	6	5	0
7/21/13	164	117	71	0	0	0	0
8/11/13	130	95	73	0	0	0	0
Total	669	360	54	632	149	24	5

This is just one example of a question that you might ask to evaluate performance or find opportunity areas. Dairy Comp 305 has a GUIDE function that walks you through the process with a simple question and answer forum. Other software will provide reports categorized by topic to help with evaluation.

The costs

Herd management software is a relatively small investment. Most software is available to rent for $30 to $80 per month, or can be purchased for a one-time cost of $2,000 to $3,000. A rental option typically include software updates while purchased products usually require a modest annual update charge for software updates. Access to technical support for initial training and ongoing questions is very important. Be sure to include the cost of this in your planning, regardless of the route you choose for obtaining software.

For more information on software options for your dairy, contact the Dairy One Agricultural Resources Group (AMR) at amr@dairyone.com or call 800-344-2697, ext 3. You can also find more information on our website, www.dairyone.com.