

Set time to do annual mastitis control activities and review achievements

Each year, time must be set aside for planning mastitis control programs and changes in milking routines and equipment. Regular time allocation for monitoring and review is an integral component of quality assurance programs, which are becoming increasingly important to the dairy (and all food producing) industries.

The 'Quality Assurance Programs' FAQ sheet describes on-farm programs in Australia.

22.1 Mark 'a day in the office' on your calendar or diary. Set time aside well in advance.

The most effective mastitis programs are those that are tailored to suit individual herds, have realistic goals and are based on factual information.

A mastitis program is a health equivalent to a farm budget. It should be planned in advance so that interventions are timely and spaced throughout the year, training needs of staff are recognised, and progress is regularly monitored.

A plan should be written annually for each dairy herd and contain the goals of the mastitis program, identify areas of change, and how and when the change will be achieved.

The tasks, and their intent, should be understood and endorsed by the farm manager (and there is much to be said for the manager writing the plan). The document should be available to all staff and kept short, simple, and not highly technical.

Components for the farm manager to consider when developing a mastitis plan for the herd include:

- A summary of the current situation. This helps provide a context to the current program and identify areas for improvement.
- Identification of broad goals – such as earning premium payments for milk for at least three months during the next season, reducing the rate of new mastitis infections, up-skilling staff etc.
- A list of the major goals. The goals should be very specific, realistic, and achievable during the next 12 months. If they are the first step in achieving a longer-term goal, this should be noted.
- Specifying activities that will help achieve these goals. Specific tasks should be listed, and each should state who is responsible and when it will be completed. Examples include routine teat dipping after each milking, wearing gloves at every milking, concreting the track near the dairy shed, etc.

Technote 24 gives examples of what to review.

The most difficult step is writing the first mastitis program and establishing a

starting point. Ideas can be obtained from local dairy advisers and discussions with peers but ultimately the value of the plan depends on its focus and its ownership by staff.

It is important to review the plan (e.g. every 3-6 months) to monitor progress and to document unexpected events such as floods and droughts that may influence progress.

Without a planned program and regular review, mastitis control on farm will be reactive and unlikely to prioritise areas for improvement. In contrast, businesses with focussed programs may pre-empt problems and reduce the risk and severity of mastitis outbreaks in high risk seasons.

22.2 Involve all members of staff and family working on the farm in developing and reviewing mastitis control activities and achievements.

Every person who works on a dairy farm has an impact on the udder health and mastitis control in the dairy herd. This includes family members, and full-time, casual and relief milking staff as well as dairy advisers. Quality assurance programs require that people have clearly defined roles, understand their duties and know who is responsible for what tasks and issues.

Some benefits of staff and family members feeling that they are part of a team are that it:

- motivates them;
- increases their willingness to co-operate and share information;
- broadens their understanding of the goals of the farm;
- increases their confidence; and
- may stimulate interest in developing new skills.

Team building is strengthened by involving everyone in reviews and planning, and will ultimately increase the effectiveness of the mastitis program. People should be able to state their views honestly and be encouraged to give and receive constructive feedback.

Signs that may indicate problems are:

- over-reliance on one person;
- excessive questioning of each decision or action taken;
- people taking the easy way out (e.g. remaining silent) rather than causing conflict;
- frustration at a lack of progress;
- feelings that the program is too big or inappropriate; and
- conceding to opinions that are presented as facts with no supporting data.

Some farms extend the incentives in the milk payment systems to their employees. For example, a 20 cent/kg fat bonus is paid to milkers of a herd in western Victoria if the vat milk stays in the premium band for the month (potentially totalling about \$12,000 a year in bonus payments).

22.3 Make an appointment with your milking machine technician for testing, servicing and (where necessary) upgrading your milking system.

Technote 25 describes how to test, service and upgrade milking machines.

