

Exploring the use of alternative milking strategies on dairies in the Northeast

As farms work to remain viable in today's dairy economy, many operators are looking for ways to adapt and/or diversify their businesses. Some farms have considered transitioning to alternative management systems that can help reduce labor, operating costs, and potentially allow flexibility to delve into other opportunities. As a result, farmers are becoming increasingly interested in adopting alternative milking schedules and seasonal milk production systems. Alternative milking schedules, such as once-a-day (OAD) or a three-times in two days (3-in-2) can theoretically lower labor costs and provide more time during the day for farm management tasks or other enterprises. Some OAD herds have reported less lameness, longer periods of uninterrupted grazing, higher body condition, and increased reproductive success. Farmers are also interested in altering milk production seasonality. By aligning lactations across part or the entire herd, farmers can overcome challenges associated with labor or feed management constraints. However, these systems present economic challenges related to lower milk production. Reducing milking frequency may reduce both milk and component yields while increasing somatic cell count. Similarly shifting to seasonal milk production will leave the farm with little to no income during dry months. Given these challenges, are these systems economically viable? A study conducted in New Zealand analyzed the financial statements of 22 farms that transitioned from twice-a-day to OAD milking. These farms decreased farm operating expenses by an average of 25.5% and experienced a 5.6% decrease in milk solids yield (Anderle and Dalley, 2007), demonstrating opportunities to improve farm profitability.

A new project, funded through the USDA Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (ONE20-360) program, seeks to explore the use of alternative milking strategies on dairy farms in the Northeast. The project will include:

1. A region wide survey that will provide insight on the current adoption and success rate of these practices on dairy farms;
2. Cost of production analysis on farms employing alternative milking strategies to provide insight on economic feasibility;
3. Creation of a benchmarking program to provide production and quality information for these systems;
4. Educational opportunities for farmers across the region to learn about the potential benefits and challenges associated with alternative milking strategies

For more information about this project please feel free contact Heather Darby at heather.darby@uvm.edu or 802-524-6501, Sarah Flack at sarahflackconsulting@gmail.com or 802-309-3714, or Sara Ziegler at sara.ziegler@uvm.edu or 802-524-6501.