

# NEXO

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## **Labor Concerns on the Modern Dairy Farm**

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The prevention of bovine mastitis on dairy farms has two key elements: medical and labor practices. Dairy cow mastitis is an infection of the udder that is communicable and costly. The findings presented here are from a multi-year, multi-state, grant-funded project led by Dr. Ronald Erskine, MSU veterinarian. The project included dairy farms in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida. It involved several team members across these states, with researchers at JSRI conducting and leading the evaluation of the project.

Titled “An Integrated Extension and Education Program to Reduce Mastitis and Antimicrobial Use,” the project sought to identify best practices on dairy farms for reducing the incidence of bovine mastitis and the use of antimicrobial treatments. One of the components of the evaluation process was to conduct focus groups with dairy farm employees and managers in each of these states to gain an understanding of their views regarding the prevention and control of mastitis.

The findings presented here focus on labor. We share these findings as a way of contributing to the understanding among Extension dairy specialists and educators of the perspectives of both producers/managers and employees regarding the prevention of mastitis.

Recent demographic changes in dairy labor in which Latino immigrants have become the majority workforce have produced new labor concerns and magnified old ones. Our research identifies labor concerns from twelve focus groups convened in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida during 2013. Our findings show that producers/managers and employees have common as well as different workplace concerns, and that Spanish-speaking employees (SSE) have concerns different from those of English-speaking employees (ESE). Three overarching

areas of concern are described in this article: 1) incentives, 2) communications, and 3) workplace. Our findings indicate that Extension educators and producers/managers should consider the needs and desires of dairy farm employees and find ways to effectively engage them in preventing and controlling mastitis on the farms.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

On average, five to six individuals participated in each focus group, with at least one conducted with producers/managers, SSEs, and ESEs in each state. In Pennsylvania there was an additional ESE focus group with producers/managers, and in Michigan there was an additional one with producers/managers and also with SSEs. Overall, 69 individuals participated in the focus groups. Table 1 provides information about the participants by occupational status (producer or employee), sex (male or female), and language (Spanish-speaking or English-speaking).

**Table 1. Language of Focus Group Participants by Occupation and Sex (n=69)**

Language	Occupation			
	Producers/Managers		Employees	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Spanish	5	0	20	1
English	27	0	12	4

#### **Procedures**

Participating project veterinarians and Extension dairy specialists assisted in convening focus groups within their respective states. The focus groups were conducted by a research assistant and the lead author; both are

**Table 2. Major Concerns of Dairy Occupational Groups**

Concerns	Occupational Groups	
	Producers/Managers (How to)	Employees (want)
<b>Incentives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effectively use worker incentives to reduce Somatic Cell Counts (SCC)</li> <li>Provide adequate bonuses to improve employee satisfaction and retention</li> <li>Boost employee morale and attitudes to improve farm efficiency</li> <li>Find time to thank employees for their work</li> <li>Improve employees' passion for their work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To receive consistent bonuses for their work</li> <li>More opportunities for wage increases</li> <li>Increased educational opportunities to better understand farm operations</li> </ul>
<b>Communications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide clear and regular communications to employees</li> <li>Meet with employees more frequently</li> <li>Encourage employees to voice questions and express concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More meetings with managers and producers</li> <li>To learn of major changes on the farm before they occur</li> <li>Have ideas and concerns heard and accepted by producers/managers</li> <li>Receive regular feedback, especially positive feedback, from managers and farm producers</li> </ul>
<b>Workplace</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain cow health, especially reducing mastitis through medicine, management, and labor</li> <li>Assess and improve the level of commitment of employees</li> <li>Ensure that farm protocols are routinely followed</li> <li>Improve relations with employees through respect and trust</li> <li>Reduce protocol drift through continual employee training</li> <li>Structure labor to maximize efficiency</li> <li>Improve employee understanding of farm goals</li> <li>Increase teamwork among employees</li> <li>Facilitate honesty between producers/managers and employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased teamwork and decreased inter-employee competition</li> <li>To improve cow health, especially reducing mastitis</li> <li>More access to written protocols comprehensible in a native language</li> </ul> <p><b><u>SSE-Specific Concerns</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased access to reference materials such as SOPs in Spanish</li> <li>Better workplace organization and scheduling</li> <li>Equal treatment when compared to ESEs</li> <li>More opportunities to obtain overtime, and be paid correctly for overtime</li> </ul>

bilingual and bicultural. Written consent was obtained using an IRB-approved form. Audio recording devices were used during the focus groups and InScribe was used to transcribe the recordings. ATLAS.ti was used to analyze the transcriptions using keywords. Labor concerns were identified and sorted into three primary categories, and a keyword list was created. ATLAS.ti was again used to contextualize keywords within the transcriptions to ascertain meaning.

**Results**

Results from the focus groups are provided in Table 2 by producers/managers and employees using the three overarching categories of concerns: Incentives, Communications, and Workplace. Results are ordered from most to least frequently expressed by participants. There are common concerns among employees, as well as concerns that are unique to SSEs; they are presented separately in the table. Readers are encouraged to pay

particular attention to the learning needs of employees and how training occurs on the farms.

Producers/managers have numerous concerns in each of the core areas. They are concerned about effectively providing incentives and bonuses to thank and motivate employees. Employees want consistent bonuses, as well as wage increases and opportunities to learn about the operations of the farm. In the area of communications, employers want to provide clear and regular communications to employees and to have more interactive discussions about farm issues. Employees want the same, including learning about changes on the farm before they occur. They also want regular feedback from managers and producers. It was noted during visits to farms that the pace of activities was demanding, and everyone always seemed to be short on time, making it difficult for substantive meetings to be had between managers and employees.

Workplace issues were numerous among both



managers and employees. Both groups want improved teamwork and cow health. Managers want adherence to milking protocols, and employees want written protocols in their native language. Managers want more trust and honesty with employees, and to structure labor to achieve greater efficiency. SSEs want reference materials in their language, better workplace organization and scheduling, equal treatment with their English-speaking counterparts, and more opportunities for overtime pay. Many are immigrants and interested in earning more money.

Interest in learning more about farm operations and practices was a key concern among employees, especially SSEs. For example, in one of the focus groups held in Michigan with SSEs, the following comments were made by respondents when discussing training on the farm:

I think it would be good if there was a school because the boss, when we start to work, tells me, “Look, you will work like this; have to spray, wipe this much time. . .” He was the one who taught us how to do this work. He told us how to do it and to keep doing it the way he taught us, but I think it would be good to take some courses. I think it would be much better.

Why is more structured learning important? A related comment in the same focus group sheds some light:

Sometimes he has told me how to [treat a cow] but I don’t know exactly what he put on because he didn’t provide much opportunity to focus on that. Even if one wants to learn, if they don’t tell us [in detail] . . . how to do it, then how will you learn?

Additionally, when milker training sessions are provided, employees may feel overwhelmed by

the material. For example, ESEs at the same dairy farm expressed the following concerns about milker training:

**Respondent A:** You’re learning everything. You get pumped full of a lot of information on your first five days with two other “milkers.” You know, the boss is pumping . . .

**Respondent B:** People typically go home with a headache.

**Respondent A:** Yeah, the boss is pumping information in you, and then, you know, your two trainers are pumping information into you, and it’s a lot to handle.

**Discussion**

**Incentives**

From our results, it became clear that dairy producers/managers and employees see the need for incentives, with producers/managers emphasizing morale issues and employees desiring better earnings and education. Producers/managers view incentives as a means to an end: improved performance, while employees want incentives to be consistent and achievable. Consistency in offering monthly bonuses is more useful for retaining employees and improving morale than are single-time bonuses. Further, loss of an accustomed monthly bonus is likely to have a negative impact. Employees also want wage raises over time. Some of the participating employees said they had been at the same rate for five years or more.

Having employees aware of farm goals is likely to motivate them, as it allows them to contribute to the achievement of the goals and to feel successful when they are met. If incentives are combined with goal setting, goals are reached faster, and employees are more engaged in their work. Goal achievement can increase profitability, and it makes good sense for producers/managers to use goals to increase farm efficiency.

SSEs are less likely to express to producers or managers their concerns about incentives, increases in monetary gain, overtime pay, and milk quality bonuses. While the desire is there, it may not be as readily voiced by SSEs in comparison to ESEs and improving communications with them is likely to improve morale and workplace processes.

Employees are interested in educational opportunities; they want to know the “why?” of the practices they are expected to carry out. Knowledge gained through



educational programs motivates employees, lends meaning and importance to their work, and makes clear their contributions to the farm. SSEs expressed a desire for educational videos in their native language. Through education, producers/managers inform employees of protocols and new technologies and strategies. They can thereby reduce employee protocol drift and improve employee engagement.

## Communications

Producers/managers want to improve communications on their dairy farms, desiring brief daily or weekly meetings combined with longer monthly meetings, but they face many time constraints that seem to prevent them from doing so. Employees also want consistent communications, at least on a monthly basis. Holding weekly meetings allows producers/managers to discuss plans and foster discussion of problems. Regular monthly meetings would give producers/managers and employees the opportunity to discuss workplace issues and discuss upcoming changes.

SSEs want to have their opinions heard without fear of repercussion. Allotting meeting time for employees to speak openly is likely to build trust as well as a sense of belonging on the part of employees. It would also help employees feel that they have some control over their jobs. Indicators of mastitis, such as somatic cell counts (SCCs), can also be discussed during monthly meetings, offering producers and managers the opportunity to present performance trends and goals. Weekly meetings can help reinforce goals and offer time for praise and constructive discussions. In meetings, producers/managers should provide positive feedback, as many employees indicated that they tend to receive more negative than positive feedback. While negative feedback must sometimes be given, it is important to provide positive feedback to improve morale.

Teamwork is another frequently mentioned communications concern. Producers/managers desire a network of hardworking individuals capable of taking pride in their work. Employees want reliable co-workers and trustworthy managers and producers. Fostering teamwork boosts morale and improves employee performance. Incentives can be used to foster teamwork that is focused on achieving farm goals. Creating teams generates a sense of belonging and shared responsibility among team members, who become stakeholders in the team's success. Furthermore, teams improve communications, with members feeling that together they can voice their views and concerns.

## Workplace

Producers/managers hold the greater number of workplace concerns. Cow health, especially by reducing mastitis, is the principal concern. Employees also hold strong views regarding cow health and mastitis-related protocols. Concerns about compliance with mastitis protocols indicate that employees have a sense of the importance of controlling mastitis.

Employees want protocol-related resources to which they can refer to perform their work. When an unfamiliar incident occurs, they can refer to the protocols to take corrective steps. Furthermore, SSEs can revisit procedures in Spanish, and this will reduce the likelihood of miscommunication.

Producers and managers must not lose touch with employees. Having meetings between producers/managers and employees is favored by employees and seen as a helpful practice. Such meetings improve relations between management and labor, providing producers/managers opportunities to get to know their employees better, and vice versa. When this occurs, the barriers to the producer/manager-employee relationship are likely to diminish. Each party not only recognizes the humanity of the other, but employees are more likely to approach producers/managers with their questions and concerns.

This is what producers and managers would like to see; they want employees to bring concerns to them. But they must first communicate to their employees that they are willing to listen to and address their concerns. Trust and respect are less likely to develop if employees believe that their employers are overworking them and imposing punishments as their principal management tool. Producers and managers lose the respect and trust of their employees, especially SSEs, when exploitation is perceived. Some SSEs voiced concern that they are



not given equal access to time off, are not adequately compensated for overtime work, and are not given fair wage increases.

**Producers/managers who take the time to identify the labor concerns present on their farms are likely to find their employees are equally concerned about cow health, especially mastitis, and would greatly enjoy the opportunities to better understand such issues.**

Employee protocol drift is another workplace issue faced by producers/managers. That is, producers/managers are concerned about employees not following the proper milking procedures. Not to do so increases the incidence of mastitis on the farm. While most producers/managers believe that protocols are followed most of the time, some have had negative past experiences, with lapsed procedures resulting in higher SCCs. This problem highlights the importance of providing written protocols and training employees to follow them. Employees also spoke about following protocols, but some admitted that they did not understand why certain protocols are important. Other employees mentioned learning milking protocols but admitted that once they were working in the parlor and saw the milking techniques of other milkers, they blended techniques. To avoid employee protocol drift, ongoing education and training is essential.

Drift can also be decreased by holding regular staff meetings. Meetings that focus on the organization of labor and the farm's goals allow employees to better understand how they fit within the framework of the farm and how their contributions improve profitability. Among SSEs, protocol drift may be due to language gaps in communicating what needs to be done and why procedures should be followed. To address this problem, many SSEs prefer protocols and reference materials written in Spanish. SSEs also desire tighter workplace organization, with written schedules and plans set out in advance. Given this desire among SSEs, producers and managers need only to have documents already available in English translated into appropriate Spanish.

### **Conclusion**

Twelve focus groups conducted with producers/managers and employees at dairy farms in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Florida demonstrate overlapping labor concerns, but from different perspectives. Concerns also vary based upon language and farm position. Overall, three broad categories of concerns emerged among the groups: incentives, communications, and workplace



issues. Future investigations of dairy labor should consider using focus groups to deepen understanding of workplace concerns held by dairy producers/managers and employees.

Extension educators and producers/managers should consider the presence of the labor concerns identified by our research on the farms they service or own and ways to address these concerns to improve employee job satisfaction and, in turn, commitment. Producers/managers who take the time to identify the labor concerns present on their farms are likely to find their employees are equally concerned about cow health, especially mastitis, and would greatly enjoy the opportunities to better understand such issues. Similarly, addressing labor concerns and providing incentives are likely to substantially improve communications across the farm, reduce workplace issues, and lead to the overall improvement in employee and farm performance. The results will include improved prevention and control of mastitis by a more closely aligned farm team. 🌱

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