

# Dairy Breeding Impaired by Energy-Short Diets, Farm Finances

by Pete Hardin

Word on the farm and in the artificial insemination industry is that a dairy livestock breeding crisis is unfolding in the U.S. – particularly in the eastern third of the nation – from Texas to Wisconsin and east.

Without normal breeding patterns in a few major U.S. dairy regions, starting last fall, results are predictable:

1) The U.S. faces serious shortages of milk supplies, starting in summer 2010. By fall 2010, the milk supply situation in the Midwest and Northeast should be one \*\*\*\* of a mess.

2) Shortages of bred dairy cows and dairy heifers should drive up the value of quality, bred animals significantly ... once a better awareness of such shortages exist (and there is some money in milk checks). Bred heifers, in 2010, are a lot better investment in money in the bank.

## 2009 crops lack energy, quality

A growing awareness: a significant percentage of milk cows (and, to a somewhat lesser degree, heifers) simply don't have enough energy in their diets to be reimpregnated – artificially or the old-fashioned way. What's wrong?

For many farmers located east of the Rocky Mountains, weather problems created several problems during the planting, growing and harvest of 2009's crops critical to dairy – corn, soybeans, forages and corn for silage. The 2009 U.S. corn crop simply lacks energy. That's because corn planting started late, and then, due to unduly cool summer temperatures, this year's crop didn't enjoy enough heat units during the growing season. In summary: the 2009 corn crop never really matured – the starches didn't mature. Extreme wet weather during October in many parts of the Corn Belt caused harvest delays. Those wet conditions and delays did not allow the 2009 corn crop to "dry down" (i.e., lose normal amounts of moisture, pre-harvest). Bottom line: the nutritional value of the 2009 U.S. corn crop is significantly sub-par.

Beyond nutrition: serious problems with molds and toxins pervade the 2009 corn crop. Mold and toxin contamination problems also impair dairy animal breeding.

Those same wet, cold conditions that delayed corn planting also caused the first forage cutting to be late and of reduced quality. How important is the first forage harvest in the Upper Midwest and Northeast? In Wisconsin, for example, 60% of the year's forages are harvested during the first cutting.

## Milking cows problematic

Many farmers and their breeders are finding great difficulty getting dairy cows and heifers bred. The problem appears particularly acute in milk cows in many herds. That's because the farmers start trying to rebreeding milk cows two to three months following their most recent calving – at a time when the dairy cow is also producing optimum amounts of milk each day. Milking 60-120 lbs. of milk per day creates a tremendous metabolic demand for nutritional resources on a dairy cow. If dairy cows' nutritional balances are not solid, ability to rebreed those animals becomes impaired.

Breeding problems started in early fall 2009 – just about the time producers started feeding (in part or in *toto*) 2009's harvests of grain, forages and silage. Widespread quality/nutrition problems facing dairy farmers cannot be wished away, nor easily solved. Feeding *more* corn to boost energy may not be a solution.

## Texas, New Mexico: big problems

A well-traveled dairy farm consultant reports that early 2010 finds a lot of dairy herds in tough shape. Heavy winter snows leave many cow lots full of mud and manure. Many dairy cows are off 200-300 pounds of body condition. Heavy snows have collapsed several dairy barns.

## 2009 animal health spending cuts also hurt

Another factor must be addressed in discussing the evolving dairy animal reproduction problem: cash-flow problems during 2009 that caused many

dairy farmers to cut back on their spending for herd health and reproductive maintenance.

In 2009, most U.S. dairy farmers faced their worst financial year since the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Normal, prudent dairy herd management practices – like regular checks by veterinarians for herd health and reproductive matters – were dropped, simply because dairy farmers couldn't afford the expenses. High-producing dairy herds require sophisticated veterinary and nutritional oversight ... to maintain peak milk flow levels. To put this situation in "car talk" vernacular: take away the "octane" from a dairy cow's fuel and the whole engine starts running rough ... particularly in the absence of regular maintenance. Failure to supplement cows' diets with minerals is another cause of reproductive problems.

Once a dairy herd's reproduction is impaired ... milk production follows. An "ideal" lactation (milking cycle) lasts for a little more than 10 months following the cow's delivery of a calf. "Normal" lactations probably last between eleven and twelve months. For cows that don't easily rebreed, farmers may decide to milk a cow for a longer period (at diminished yields), or else "dry her off" (cease milking) and continue maintaining her until she again calves and starts milking. (The latter presumption is that the cow eventually does become pregnant again.)

On top of everything all their other headaches, dairy farmers have little discretionary cash flow with which to try to address such breeding problems and maintain milk flow. The "Milk Price Famine of 2009" will have a very long tail, in terms of impairing this nation's ability to produce milk to meet the nation's consumers' needs.