

Negative DCAD: Good for the cows, good for you

Tim Brown for *Progressive Dairy*

AT A GLANCE

Time is one of the most valuable commodities on a dairy farm, and it is often in short supply. Producers who use negative DCAD spend less time treating sick cows and have more time for family.

“My dad taught me that if we take care of the cows, they take care of us,” says Chris Heins, sixth-generation dairy farmer in Lafayette County, Missouri. Cow health and

cow welfare affect cow performance, the bottom line of the dairy and even time for family.

That’s why Paul Heins (Chris’ dad) started feeding a negative

DCAD diet to close-up cows in 2004. Milk fevers were pretty common back then; so were other transition cow problems such as displaced abomasum and ketosis. The impact was noticed almost immediately. Milk fever is now a rarity. They spend less time treating transition cows. Fewer transition problems have translated into more milk, better cow performance and even more family meals together. “With kids

of my own now, I don’t need to miss supper to have to IV a cow,” Heins says. “Any time you can prevent a problem, it’s better than having to solve it later.”

Noticeable results, that’s what implementing a negative DCAD diet for close-up cows delivers. Staff who work with maternity cows and just-fresh cows are often the first to notice. They will ask, “What changed?” because the cows are doing so much better. They notice that cows deliver calves more quickly, that they have to treat fewer cows for milk fever, and that, overall, there are fewer transition health problems. They notice the benefits of negative DCAD diets before it shows up in the records or as a trend line in the data.

The “how” and “why” of negative DCAD diets have been well documented by decades of individual research trials and on-farm experiences. The multitude of good things that happen to cows from just 21 days of special mineral nutrition before they freshen cannot be disputed. The recent meta-analysis of published research clearly confirms these benefits are real.

Firm believers in DCAD

Jerome, Idaho, dairy producers Mike and Connie Thompson are firm believers in the benefits of negative DCAD diets. Years spent tending to the dairy’s hospital pens prior to implementing a negative DCAD program taught Connie that preventative practices, from the start, allow for a truly healthy and profitable herd. They have witnessed the benefits of DCAD firsthand as they grew the dairy from 300 to 900 cows.

“I can never understand why other dairies don’t do DCAD. It just seems so obvious to me how important it is,” Connie says. DCAD has become an integral piece of their management plan. They don’t consider it as extra work. The Thompsons say it is a necessary act of prevention that eliminates the time and heartache bound up in treating sick cows. “If you wait until after that cow is sick, you have to treat the sickness. You can treat a symptom, but you aren’t really fixing the problem,” says Connie. “Negative DCAD fixed the problem. It’s one of those products that truly works,” she says. “It makes life easier.”

Heins recalls a time when their anionic supplement was inadvertently left out of the ration for the close-up cows. Suddenly, the 650-cow dairy started having milk fevers and displaced abomasums. Their nutritionist conducted a quick investigation, which revealed

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Tim Brown
 Director of Technical Support
 SoyChlor
 tfbrown@bluevalley.net

the omission of this important ingredient. Once the feed mill added DCAD back into the ration, the cows responded, and the problems quickly disappeared.

Time saved

Time is one of the most valuable commodities on a dairy farm, and it is often in short supply. Producers who use negative DCAD will tell you less time spent treating sick cows makes a big difference in their day.

“To me, it takes more time and management to not implement a DCAD program,” Heins says. DCAD management at Heins Dairy amounts to about 30 minutes of work every other week. They average 60 cows in their pre-fresh pen and check about 20 to 30 percent of the group for urine pH. Results are logged in a spreadsheet and emailed to their nutritionist. Compare that to the time it takes to treat and care for just one sick cow, and prevention is clearly a better plan.

Over the years, dairy producers have learned the value of all kinds of good cow management and of doing things right. Cow comfort, no overcrowding in the close-up and just-fresh pens, keeping fresh feed in front of the cows to encourage intake and heat abatement strategies are all examples of things producers have adopted because they benefit the cows, are economically efficient and improve long-term sustainability of the dairy. Negative DCAD diets fit that category, too. It is a management change that pays dividends.

Having healthier and happier cows can even have a positive impact on the attitude, welfare and job satisfaction of the cows’ caregivers. Lest we forget, the people on the dairy are important too. In addition to noticeable benefits, the other term I often hear from producers who try negative DCAD is: relieved. They are relieved they finally found something that makes the transition into lactation delightfully easy and puts an end to always having to vein a cow at the most inconvenient time – family dinner, during the night or instead of going to a kid’s ball game. If you haven’t tried negative DCAD, maybe now is your time. It only takes some simple balancing of the minerals in the pre-fresh diet and some simple monitoring of urine pH to get the nutrition dialed in right. Your cows, your family and your employees will thank you. 🐄



Photo by Darío Martínez

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