



ANIMAL CARETAKERS face many challenges and, on occasion, must make difficult decisions about a cow's future.

Taking care of the ups and downs

It's a difficult task, but someone on your farm must be responsible for down cow care.

by Abby Bauer

ALL farms need good "cow people," individuals who have a natural ability to work well with animals.

These talented people keep the herd healthy and take care of animals that become sick. It also takes the right type of person to care for an injured or sick down cow.

Riverview LLP, a diversified agribusiness located based in Morris, Minn., has gone so far as to create down cow care teams for its dairy farms. According to Conrad Spangler, D.V.M., this concept stemmed from the fact that their dairy farms are geographically dispersed throughout the Upper Midwest and the Southwest.



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"As we talked about developing needs, one challenge was creating some consistency and clear expectations across the whole system," Spangler said during a Dairy Cattle Welfare Council webinar. He has been with Riverview for the past 7.5 years.

The down cow care teams ensure all caregivers for this critical group of animals are on the same page. When creating this structure, Spangler pointed out three keys to making this work: The right people, the right training, and measuring the right things.

The human element

Spangler emphasized the need to have specific people dedicated to emergency animal care and down cow situations. "We want it to be very clear to everyone who to call," he said.

They also want people who are trusted and experienced. "We want people who understand our culture, our values, and who have

been with us a while," he said. "We need to trust that they will make the right decision."

Candor is one of the farm's overall values, and this is especially important in the area of cow care. "We need people in these situations that will give open, honest feedback," he said. For example, an employee needs to feel comfortable reporting a gate that doesn't swing right or if the floor is too slippery in a certain area. "We want their feedback so we can continually improve," he explained.

These people also need to be caring. "They need to be someone that cares about animal welfare and animal care," he said. "Let's put the right people in the right spot."

Additionally, these individuals must be mentally resilient. "The down cow care teams are tasked with dealing with the most difficult situations that happen on the dairy," Spangler said. "Sometimes they have to make end of life decisions. They have to make these decisions because the animal can't make them for itself. That is not an easy task."

He continued, "It is our responsibility as caretakers to make those decisions, but some people have a hard time doing that." He said that one of the most difficult skills to teach is when to make the decision to euthanize an animal.

Trained for the job

At the dairies Spangler works with, the down cow care teams receive training on their down cow protocols, how to hand nonambulatory cows, proper use of the hip lift, how to tie a halter, and proper euthanasia technique. They also have an internal animal welfare program called "Be Kind" in which all employees participate. People are retrained every six months.

Spangler said that part of providing the right training is setting very well-defined expectations. "We spell out very clearly that as part of the down cow care team, you are a leader in animal welfare in our business and must act as such," he said. "Animal care is a priority."

He likened these individuals to local first

responders. He also said farm management should make it very clear that they have the authority and responsibility to make whatever decision is necessary.

It is also important to train others on the dairy about the role of the down cow care team. Everyone should know who these people are and have access to their phone numbers. There needs to be coverage and access to one of these individuals 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Measure the right things

Down cows are an animal welfare concern, and farms should strive to improve. The most likely way to improve is to track progress.

"Morbidity and mortality are the very best indicators of animal welfare we have out there," Spangler said. "Lameness, hock scores, and body condition score all play into welfare. But at the end of the day, there is still an opportunity to improve morbidity and mortality."

He added, "If you have fewer sick and dying animals on a dairy farm, that is a pretty good indicator of welfare in general."

He encouraged farms to measure the number of down cows, and track where these incidents are happening, and how often. Is there a pattern that indicates the need for a facility redesign or more stockmanship training? "You can only do better if you've gone through and measured it," he said.

He also revisited the training topic. Make sure people are trained, that it's documented, and that retraining is done when needed. "It's hard to meet expectations if you haven't set them during a training," he said.

If your farm participates in some sort of animal welfare audit (the Farmers Assuring Responsible Management or FARM program, for example), Spangler said to understand what those audits are saying and use the results to make changes.

On their farm, any time the down cow care team is called, they put a dot on a map of the farm at that location. That way, they have a diagram of where they need to focus their efforts.

It's a simple idea, but it's a method of tracking that is very visible. "Just start measuring something," he said. "Then you can start seeing some kind of trends. Otherwise, you are completely flying in the dark."

He also said to put this tracking where employees can see it. "If you don't bring it to the forefront, you don't have people talking about it, and no improvement ever comes from the thing you are tracking," he said.

Spangler reiterated that the people in charge of sick and down cows have a tough job, and they carry an important responsibility for the farm.

"Our highest paid people on our dairies are on the down cow care teams," he said.

Who takes care of sick and down cows on your farm? Is it you, another family member, or an employee?

Whatever the case may be, as farmers, we have a responsibility to care for animals in both sickness and in health. Having the right person or people well trained to make tough decisions, and making improvements where needed by tracking issues, is something that can improve animal welfare on dairies of any size. 🐄



Dairy Cattle Welfare Council (DCWC) webinar recordings are available to members of the organization. For more information, visit <https://dcwcouncil.org>.