

Taking care of hooves reduces costs in the dairy industry

A new database developed by hoof trimmers is helping the dairy industry address the problem of lameness caused by digital dermatitis, an infectious foot disease that costs the Ontario industry \$4 million a year.

“Hoof trimmers are the ones on farm seeing the problems, so it made sense to use them to carry out evaluations and observations and record them to a central database so we could establish the current prevalence of digital dermatitis in Ontario dairy herds,” says Vic Daniel, the Hoof Health Project Co-ordinator.

The one-year project was launched in late 2011 with training for 12 hoof trimmers, including how to use computer software specific to the initiative, identify lesions, and gather and analyse data. Similar projects were already under way in Alberta and British Columbia. Over 380 herds participated and hoof trimmers created 49,000 hoof health records on 24,000 cows over the duration of the project. This data was used to create statistical analyses of lesions and their prevalence in the herds.

“Trimmers looked at a variety of factors when they were gathering data, with a mandate of simply examining what they were seeing,” explains Daniel. “We had anecdotal emergence of trends, but now we also have the data to back up what they’re seeing. We now have a final analysis on 340 farms where there is a much better understanding of this disease and hoof trimmers who can convey training and communications about the disease to their clients.”

The average cost of a digital dermatitis infection is \$130/cow as a result of lost milk production, treatment and reduced fertility. In Ontario, the disease costs the industry an average of \$4 million annually and Daniel estimates the annual cost at \$8 to 12 million nationwide.

“This project wouldn’t have happened without the support of the staff at the Agricultural Adaptation Council and the ABP program,” says Daniel. “We’re now looking for ways to continue this work nation-wide and the industry will have a significant return on its investment from this.”

“If we can develop a strategy to reduce digital dermatitis by 25 per cent, that’s a \$3 million savings per year to Canadian dairy industry,” he says, adding that although the project is complete, hoof trimmers are still gathering data as they serve their clients.

Approximately 75 per cent of herds surveyed had no biosecurity practices in place, says Daniel, so a one-page risk assessment chart for farmers was developed in addition to the project’s final report. The chart, says Daniel, will help farmers understand why their livestock have digital dermatitis and how they can focus on removing it from their herds. It will be available on www.ontariohoofhealth.ca, and is expected to be laminated and distributed in the coming year.