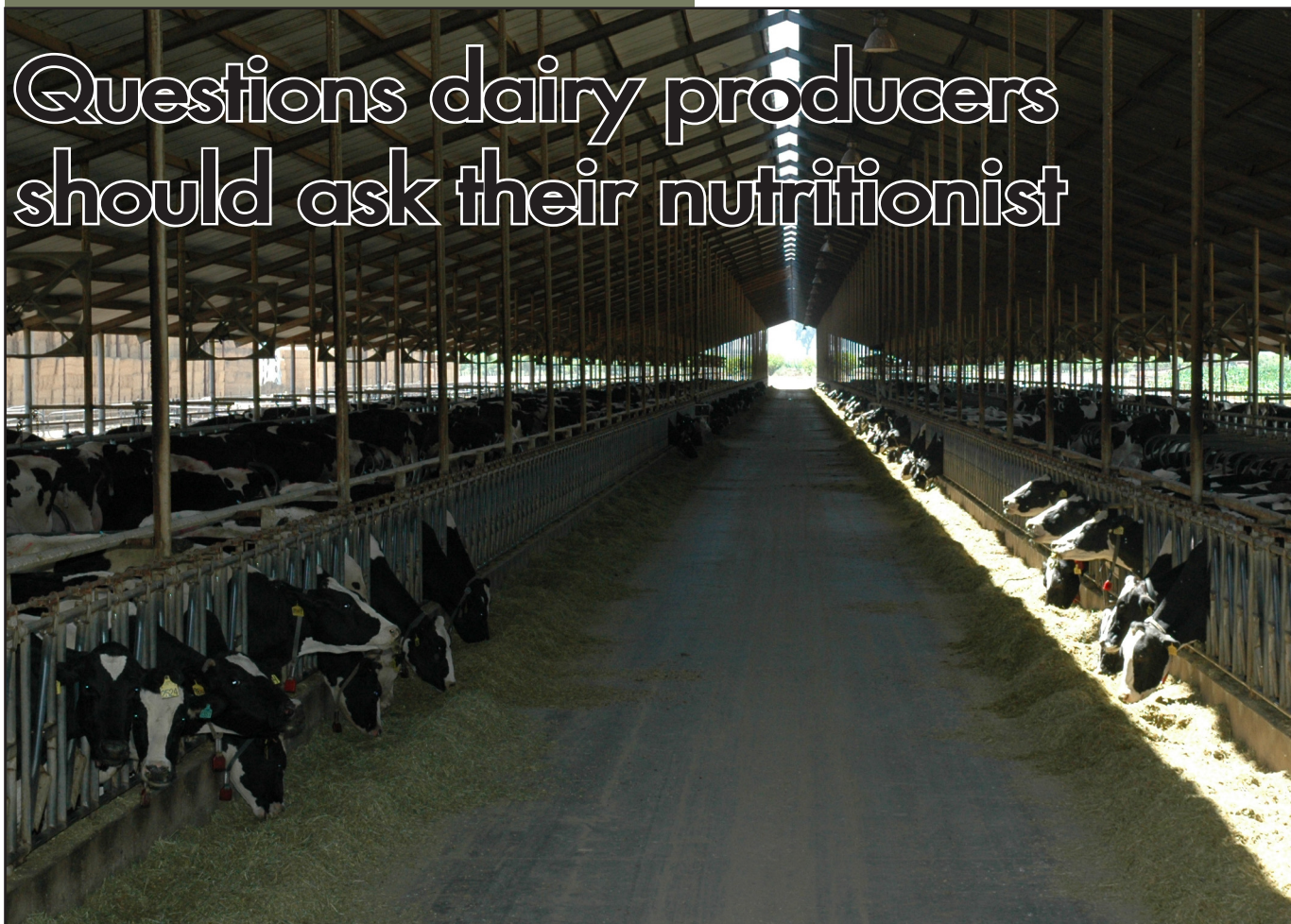


# Questions dairy producers should ask their nutritionist



By Ron Goble

**Dairy industry nutrition** professionals have a huge job to do – keep dairy cows well fed and healthy, while not bankrupting the struggling dairyman. Feed costs are skyrocketing, which makes a nutritionist's job more difficult than normal.

To bring focus to the nutritionists' role, *Western DairyBusiness* has asked a California nutritionist to outline some key questions dairy producers should ask their nutritionist, or ask when they are interviewing a new candidate to fill the role of their nutritionist.

Matt Budine, president of Progressive Dairy Solutions, Inc., in Oakdale, Calif., suggested dairy producers could ask the following questions to get a good sense about what their priorities should be:

## 1. Do you own a pair of rubber boots?

**Budine:** Getting out and walking the cows to see how the cows behave, their condition, is one of the most critical parts of the job, which helps them balance the diet correctly and properly for that dairyman.

Some nutritionist sit by their fax machine and that's not what you want out of your nutritionist. We believe the cows tell the story and if you're not there to see the cows, walk the corrals and communicate with the

people that care for the cows, you are missing a huge piece of the puzzle.

One of my philosophies of nutrition is "the art of nutrition." That's the ability of the nutritionist to balance the diet according to each dairyman's goals, taking into account cow comfort, feeding management, labor limitation, herd health and cow behavior.

It's important for the nutritionist to understand all those areas of operation on a dairy before he starts working on the diets. If a herd is overcrowded, and you make the same ration as you do for an uncrowded dairy, you are not taking into account the different eating behavior and select feeding is different. That overcrowded situation can cause metabolic challenges.

Conditions on the dairy make a big difference, whether it's heat stress or lameness issues. Each can impact how often a cow gets to the feedbunk and diets might need to be formulated differently.

Often a dairyman's most limiting factor is the amount of money he can borrow from the bank, which often depends on the number of cows he has on the dairy. Sometimes the banker calls the shots.

There are times when we could tell a dairyman to cull 100 cows and he'd make more milk as a result of curing the crowding problem. However, the banker may say they can't.

Using the cow comfort index we can provide a

guideline audit sheet so a dairyman can see how he ranks compared to other dairies.

## 2. What type of benchmarking do you do for your dairymen so you know how well each herd is doing compared to others?

**Budine:** Benchmarking needs to have information from outside the nutritionist's group. One nutritionist can benchmark his or her own performance, but needs to bring in results from other professionals for a broader perspective on how well they are doing.

Benchmarking should include all the standard measurements of milk production, components of butter fat and protein, feed efficiency, herd health production parameters (metabolic disorders on a percentage basis), the turnover rate (culled or died in first 60 days in milk), ration cost per pound of dry matter, and income over feed costs (milk margin). Those with the best feed efficiency will have the best milk margins.

Pregnancy rate is another key benchmark. We like to see all our herds over a 20%, 21-day pregnancy rate. The California average is about 16% and the very best herds will be around 24% to 25% pregnancy rate.

Benchmarks are tied to client-based goals. Some producers want you to spend more time on the feed cost side or focus on a lot of the production parameters.

We measure up to 70 different parameters, but each dairyman must determine what are the key drivers for their business.

Some focus on milk production, components, energy corrected milk, peak milk production by each individual lactation group, and first service conception rate on the reproduction side.

We try to get dairymen to narrow their focus down to 10 or less parameters that they think are the most vital to the success of their dairy. That's where we place our focus and if there is a problem in another area we troubleshoot that in addition.

### 3. How well do they work with others?

**Budine:** A successful nutritionists must have a great working relationship with the herd veterinarian, the A.I. breeder, and hoof trimmer and the entire dairy team, which consists of other dairy professionals.

Today's dairies are so big and complex. It's not the one-on-one relationship of the producer and the nutritionist. They typically have a fresh cow manager, a feed manager, an elite breeder, and a milk barn manager. You have to be able to communicate, train and motivate all aspects of the on-farm team, including the lead decision maker.

### 4. Do you or your team have a training resource for the dairyman's employees?

**Budine:** It's important to be able to bring in other resource people who can do on-farm training in English and Spanish. We put on a variety of schools for our dairyman's employees. Enrique Scholnik, a veterinarian/nutritionist, conducts separate schools for milkers, calving crews, feeders, those with medicine responsibilities, and general dairy management. Everyone should understand the science behind the protocols you require on your dairy.

We teach the basic science and expands from there. Scholnik stresses that everything is done through people. We can make all these great recommendations, but if we don't explain things so those who do the job on a day-to-day basis can understand, we're fighting a losing battle.

The people actually injecting the fresh cow or calves, don't always understand the right dosage, how to use it, when to use it and the length of time to use it. If they don't give the right dosage your program isn't working. They need to know how their procedures fit the program and how they matter to the animal.

### 5. Are you willing to give me unbiased advice and be open and transparent with the presentation of that advice?

**Budine:** Having a transparent relationship and understand how they do business together, from their

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process of bidding things out for the dairyman to understanding the marketplace from the standpoint of ingredient cost and price changes.

Relationship must be based on unbiased consulting.

### 6. What do you do to keep your nutrition and management skills sharp and what resources do you have to backup your knowledge base?

**Budine:** No one nutritionist can answer every question that arises in the course of their day. However, they need to have a ready resource or team to act as a backup when it is necessary to dig into various issues that might be beyond your specialty.

### 7. How can you design a ration to maximize rumen health and production at same time?

**Budine:** My philosophy that to balance for rumen health first, and then you will maximize production. You can make some short-term gains in milk production while sacrificing long term rumen health. Basically, it comes down to a nutritionist that won't break nutritional barriers to sacrifice health of cow to gain milk production. It has to be a mind set. Most nutritionists know where those barriers are, but must be disciplined not to break those rules.

### 8. What kind of quality control program do you offer to dairymen?

**Budine:** As a nutritionist, you need to have a quality control process on your entire feeding program. What we put in that category first is forage quality, forage sampling, ingredient quality and sampling. If a dairyman is on a software program like FeedWatch, we have parameters that we benchmark within FeedWatch to track how each feeder is doing. Feeder error reports that tell us how we are targeting ingredient use vs. ingredient targets. Is the feeder under-feeding or over-feeding? How are your feeders doing?

### 9. Can you, as a nutritionist, balance for ingredients and nutrients?

**Budine:** Some nutritionists strictly have an ingredient bias and balance ingredient only. Other nutritionists strictly balance for the nutrients without care of ingredients that contribute toward those nutrients. We

believe it is important for the dairyman to understand that you need a nutritionist that is balancing both the ingredient and ingredient integrity in mind, as well as the nutrient content and the nutrient integrity of those ingredients.

You must have a great understanding of both those areas and know how ingredients work because some change depending on how they are processed. Cows can be affected in a negative way if they are not careful.

We spend a lot of money on testing the nutrient composition of those ingredients. Feeding 4 pounds of distillers may not be the same if it is coming from one supplier or another. If you are just plugging in 4 pounds of distillers, you might not be truly balancing that diet.

### 10. Does the nutritionist bid out the diet composition to make sure the dairyman is getting quality ingredients at the best cost?

**Budine:** The ingredients the nutritionist is buying should be the best in quality and cost. With your mineral and protein mixes, whatever the blend might be, we think it is important the nutritionist actually bid those out. It takes time and a lot of work, but you are working for your dairyman.

All ingredient substitutions must be taken into consideration. We routinely send bids to six different companies.

One example was an ingredient at a feeding rate of 6 pounds. The difference between the high and low bids was \$60/ton or 3-cents per pound. So to the dairyman it was 18-cents per cow per day difference, or \$65,000 a year. That one bid could save the dairyman \$65,000.

It's important the dairyman knows his nutritionist is doing that for him.