

Proper planning for dairy farm expansion: quite a challenge!

Annik Perron, Communication Manager



Photo : Sonia Gosselin

For a variety of reasons, many dairy enterprises will someday consider an expansion project. The idea may look simple, but along the way, people can often be faced with overwhelming obstacles, because the project suffered from a lack of planning from the start. These difficulties are quite common, so Valacta created a strategic orientation committee to better define the problems and look for efficient solutions.

The Valacta Board of Directors gave this mandate to well known experts with wide field experience (see box).

These experts concluded that often dairy farm owners do not know

enough about the various aspects that need to be analyzed (technical, environmental, human, financial, etc.). Also, they do not know what data they should base their decisions on when they look into an expansion project. Not only are the available resources (financial advisors, advisory groups, strategic advisor, etc.) not well known to producers, but in addition, people simply do not know where to begin their analysis and which steps to take or in what order.

For their part, the various advisors, each in his own sector, still too often work separately, and cannot give adequate advice on every aspect that the producer should master

before he goes ahead with his expansion project.

In addition, there is currently no service offer available which provides comprehensive support to the producer who wants to set up an expansion project.

In order to correct this situation, the committee recommends that:

- An inventory of existing tools/resources should be compiled,
- Both advisors and producers be made aware of their availability,
- A general guide, as well as a multi-disciplinary service offer to assist dairy farm expansion planning, should be offered.

In the next few months, various actions will be taken so that these solutions become available as quickly as possible.

Valacta is listening and taking action.

Committee Members

Mr. Gilles A. Michaud, Committee President, Valacta board member and dairy producer, Kamouraska
 Mr. Alphonse Pittet, Valacta and CIAQ Board Member, dairy producer, St-Tite
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Dairy Knowledge at your fingertips

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Why care for the health of your herd ?



Photo : Bertrand Farmer

One good reason to care for the health of your herd is the growing concern of consumers about the welfare of the animals providing their food products. But first things first, it is also highly profitable. Like a wise man said: better be rich and healthy than poor and sick. In the case of production animals, it is the producer who gets rich or poor as his herd gets healthier (or not).

Industry Action

So, the Canadian Dairy Network (CDN) has coordinated an industry-wide initiative that will move Canada into the forefront in terms of recording animal health information from dairy herds across the country. With \$600,000 in financial support from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and Holstein Canada, the Canadian DHI partners have been developing the National Dairy Cattle Health and Disease Data Management System,

which will be launched later in 2007. It is designed to allow health data to be available for genetic evaluations. All centres, research and veterinarian organizations have greatly contributed. In Quebec, a highly efficient health data collection system is in place through DS@HR (Animal Health Record). Through close collaboration between Valacta and these Veterinarians, software interfaces have been developed to transfer AHR records to the national system, in order to provide the dairy industry with valuable data for genetic evaluations.

Producer Action

You will soon find that recording the incidence of the eight primary diseases (see box) will bring added value to your herd management and eventually to sire selection and genetic improvement. Once the new data collection software system is launched in the upcoming months, interested producers will be encouraged to provide milk recording technicians with accurate and complete information associated with all occurrences of these eight diseases within their herd. You will be told when this data collection will begin.

Eight diseases with major impact on herd profitability

1. Milk Fever
2. Retained Placenta
3. Metritis
4. Ketosis
5. Left Displaced Abomasum
6. Cystic Ovarian Disease
7. Lameness
8. Clinical Mastitis

By Annik Perron,
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From an article by Brian Van Doormaal,
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Do your cows live long enough to be profitable?

Daniel Lefebvre, Ph.D., P.Ag., R&D Manager



The genetics of Canadian cows is known worldwide, notably for its attributes enhancing longevity and profitability¹. But do we take full advantage of these genetics? For about 20 years, the average age at last calving of Quebec cows has been hovering around 4 years and 2 months, which is one year less than in the mid 70's. Of course, our cows also give a lot more milk, but is this a reason to cull them younger? Many cows perform very well for several lactations. So why kill the goose that lays the golden eggs?

Ideally, the decision to cull should be based on economics alone: you choose to cull a cow because you can replace her with a more profitable one. Unfortunately, nowadays, more than 45% of cows are culled before they even begin their third lactation.

The problem is that a cow really becomes profitable from the start of third lactation. So, why are we depriving ourselves of the more productive years of 45% of our cows? Furthermore, by doing so, we have to cover the cost of raising her (our "fixed costs") on less milk output.

Data from financial advisors show that it costs about \$2500 to raise a cow to first calving. Considering an average longevity of a little more than two lactations, this comes to about \$11 per hectolitre. For the heifer that does not make it to her second calving, raising her will have cost more than \$30 per hL, and this, only if she yields 8000 litres in her single lactation. On the other hand, if she has four lactations, the cost of raising her comes down to \$7 per hL, because she had the opportunity to produce more than 35,000 litres in her career. So it is in our best interest to have more cows in the 35,000 litres range... and above.

We have to question the reasons why our cows are culled, especially those that do not complete three lactations. Every time a cow leaves the herd, you are asked to note the exact reason. This helps with keeping statistics, but more importantly, this data is essential to improve your management. Have you reviewed your

performance lately? Take a look at the table below.

First, on your Vision2000 Performance Record - Herd Summary report, notice the percentage of cows in their third lactation and more. Compare their average production to that of first lactation animals. They probably give 20 to 25% more milk per lactation than the rookies. These are your profitable cows. Then find the average age of the herd. Where does it stand compared with current provincial average? Keep in mind that this average is by no means a target. It would be in our best collective interest to see this figure move noticeably upward. Then, note the number of cows that left the herd during the last year. Divide this figure by the total number of cows (12 months average), and you get your culling rate.

To go even further, ask your Valacta advisor or technician to provide you with the Agri-Lacta Culling Analysis report for the last year. This report lists all the cows that left the herd during this period, with some useful information.

First ask for a sort by culling reason. You will get an instant portrait of the main culling reasons in your herd.

Mastitis or high cell counts are forcing you to cull several cows? You will want to review your milking system and milking methods, as well as sanitation conditions. Work with your vet to find the cause of these cases of mastitis. Call a VMEM² technician to make sure that your milking equipment is part of the solution, not part of the problem. Metabolic problems around calving time caused the loss of several cows? Review the transition feeding management program with your advisor. Injuries forced the early culling of promising animals? Check herd management and comfort in the barn. Finally, if you cull cows that are still productive simply because

too many heifers are calving, you will want to revise your replacement strategy so that you raise only the heifers you really need.

Once culling reasons are identified, ask for a sort by culling age. How many cows were culled before their third lactation? How much milk did they yield in their lifetime? How many cows did not get the chance to give 25,000 kg?

Also, take a look at the cow rating and genetic index of the culled cows. Have you culled top cows (rating >100) or the lesser subjects? Compare the LPI (Lifetime Profit Index) of the culled cows with the

herd average (see your Vision2000 Genetic Inventory report or the Agri-Lacta Genetic Evaluation report).

With a clear, no-nonsense portrait of culling within your herd, you have the necessary information to establish an action plan. The objective is simple: each calving heifer must get her chance to produce milk long enough to bring profit.

Longevity and Culling Analysis

Parameter	My herd	Quebec Average(Holstein) ^a
Percentage 3rd Lactation and +		40.31%
Average calving age (years-months)		4 years - 1 month
Culling Rate (%)		38%
Three main culling reasons (All breeds, 2005)		
1.		1. Reproduction: 18%
2.		2. Mastitis: 16%
3.		3. Feet and legs: 8%
Cows leaving the herd		
Percentage culled before 3 rd lactation		45%
Average lifetime production		-
Average LPI of culled cows		-
Average LPI of the herd		284

^a For other breeds, ask your Valacta advisor or technician for current statistics, or check the 2005 Évolution de la production laitière québécoise, page 43, Table 3-1.

¹ The dairy industry is taking steps to improve cow durability further yet, by implementing a national system to collect health data for genetic evaluation purposes (see page 1).

² Verification of Milking Equipment and Methods

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The Quebec dairy production centre of expertise

This Spring's "Cue Card"

Take time to weigh heifers before sending them to pasture.