

Safety management on dairy farms: Owner and manager commitment

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In recent years, we have seen a heightened emphasis on worker safety on U.S. dairy farms. Dairy operations in the U.S. continue to have high worker injury and fatality rates as compared to general industry, as well as other agriculture production operations.

As a result, local emphasis programs (LEPs) for programmed inspections of dairy farms in Wisconsin and New York have been established by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in these two states. This *Progressive Dairyman* communication is the first of several articles addressing safety management and leadership on dairy farms.

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The fundamental tenet to any dairy farm safety program is that owners and managers must understand that the safety of employees is an integral part of doing business. Managers must accept the responsibility of stimulating awareness of safety among workers, and also demonstrate commitment to the safety of workers if those workers are expected to cooperate in making workplace conditions safe. Managers and supervisors must reflect this same interest in the safety of employees. Each manager and supervisor must assume responsibility for the safety of his or her own department and must be given the necessary authority to fulfill that obligation.

A safety program must always start with owners and top management. Owners and managers must realize their injury problems and demand safe operations. Owners' and managers' attitudes toward injury prevention are almost invariably adopted by supervisors and employees. If owners and managers are not genuinely interested in preventing injuries, no one else on the dairy will likely be interested. Any injury control program, therefore, must start with the owner and manager with announced and demonstrated interest, if employee cooperation and participation are expected to be obtained.

Owners or managers owe it to themselves and to their employees not only to promote safety and safe working environments, but also to provide a safety policy, implemented by rules that are enforced. Mere lip service, regardless of any motivational principle, will eventually undermine the program, which will lose its effectiveness.

A prime requisite for any safety program is to leave no doubt in the minds of the dairy workers that management is concerned about the prevention of injuries on the farm. Owners' and managers' attitudes toward the safety of their employees must be demonstrated in the form of a written policy statement and made known to all levels of management and workers alike. This policy should outline the organization's aims and objectives for its safety program and should designate the authority and responsibilities for achieving them.

The policy should be given wide publicity and should set the pace for both management and worker responsibilities to the program. The mechanism of delivery of this policy should be as important as the clarity with which it identifies functional authority and responsibility, especially given that the working population in the dairy industry is made up of low-literacy, non-English speaking workers.

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Management controls

Since owners and managers control all aspects of the dairy, including hiring, training, production, quality control and a variety of many other activities common to dairy operations, they must also control the recognition, evaluation and control of workplace hazards.

The same standards for achieving production, quality control and a host of other dairy-related objectives should also be used for achieving job health and safety objectives. Managers must be involved in the activities required for planning, organizing and controlling job-related health and safety activities. All managers must be held accountable for all specific safety responsibilities that cannot be delegated downward.

To be most effective, the focus of manager safety efforts should be on hazard control, rather on "accidents." The control of hazards on the dairy farm requires the application of good, sound management skills. Cost-conscious farms have learned that they must control injury incidents and their costs if they are to do business in today's highly competitive dairy market.

Assumption of responsibility

The establishment of responsibility for safety at each level of management forges an unbroken chain of accountability from the owner of the dairy down to the supervisor. This accountability must be extended in a direct line through each work area to each worker. Dairy managers must see to it that this responsibility is fully accepted and then in turn, hold supervisors accountable for the safety performance of their respective areas of responsibility.

A successful safety program must have the backing of owners and managers as well as the cooperation of its workers. If owners are not interested in injury prevention, it is most likely that others in the management structure will reflect the same attitude. Employee safety programs are successful only when there is a genuine commitment by owners and dairy managers. Such commitment must filter down through the entire organization, from owner to manager to supervisor to employee.

Assignment of responsibility

A common attitude is that safety is everyone's responsibility. This is generally true, but common and statute law dictate that the safety of the worker is a management responsibility. Those in ultimate control of the organization must regard the provision of a safe workplace as a fundamental principle in their relations with their employees. Successful safety programs have one thing in common: There is a deep-seated commitment by top management. Such commitment filters down through the organizational hierarchy to the workers.

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Today, it is imperative that owners and managers become involved and participate in the dairy's safety programs because of the vast scope and potential consequences of state and federal legislation dealing with occupational safety and health. The role of safety on the U.S. dairy farm is exemplified by the number and variety of regulations, laws and court decisions. Therefore, the fundamental elements of a dairy farm safety program include the following:

1. Owners and top managers must provide a forceful and continuous leadership role in the safety program.
2. Work environments on dairy farms must be made safe, free of recognized hazards known to cause injury, illness or fatality among workers. This involves implementing a mechanism to identify, recognize and control hazards known to cause injuries, illnesses or fatalities among dairy workers.
3. Supervisors must be competent and effective leaders to facilitate safe behaviors among workers.
4. Employee participation in injury prevention must be maintained.
5. Supervisors and workers must be trained in the recognition and reporting of safety hazards on farms.
6. Employees must abide by all safety rules and perform their job duties in a safe manner. **PD**

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Take part in a survey to help the High Plains and Intermountain Center for Agricultural Health and Safety (and partners) develop safety management and leadership training programs.