

Should You Switch to 3X Milking?

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The struggling national economy, the costs associated with a prolonged drought, and depressed milk prices are among the many forces that continue to put financial pressure on many dairy producers. In an attempt to keep themselves fiscally sound, many producers have implemented various cost cutting strategies and different management practices to improve the efficiency of their operations. One potential profit generating practice that producers may want to consider incorporating into their management program is switching from 2X to 3X a day milking frequency.

Milking 3X has both positive and negative aspects. The negative aspect most often mentioned relates to the labor required to do the third milking each day. Finding the labor (either family or hired), and then managing a milking schedule can be a serious problem and a real emotional and physical drain. This can especially be the case where only family labor is involved.

The positive aspects often mentioned as resulting from switching to 3X milking are more milk per cow, better cow and udder health, better cow reproductive performance, and usually more profit. The benefits vary from farm to farm, depending on their individual situations. Many producers have concluded that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

Before switching to 3X milking, producers should calculate the anticipated additional costs and returns that might result from increasing the milking frequency. In estimating the extra amount of milk that might result from changing to 3X milking, dairy advisors have often stated that an increase of from about 10 to 20% should be obtained. The amount would vary due to the herd's production level, management level, genetic potential of the cows, feed quality, and other unidentified factors. A research report published a few years ago by University of Maryland dairy specialists showed that Holstein cows could be expected to produce about 7.7 more pounds of milk per day when switched to 3X milking from 2X. The specialists summarized the results from over 40 comparison trials conducted under varied conditions. The increase amount varied from 7.1 to 8.6 pounds daily within a 95% confidence interval. Using a value of 7 to 8 more pounds of milk might be a more accurate estimate of the expected increase than using a percentage increase.

As with estimating the increased amount of milk to expect, the extra costs associated with 3X milking also have often been estimated with a wide range of accuracy. While using data from various record analysis programs can be helpful to estimate production expenses, they probably are not very accurate for an individual farm. Producers who do not have detailed records of their various production expenses should take the time to determine those expenses before calculating expected returns from switching to 3X milking.

Extension agents and specialists, as well as other properly trained consultants, can assist producers with implementing a record keeping program that will provide the detailed financial information needed to make informed, intelligent management decisions. Do the calculations to determine if this practice could help you realize more income from your dairy operation.