

STEBEN, Wis. - Call it "The Case of the Uncomfortable Cows." This mini mystery involving some of Wandy Peralta's cows was investigated during a recent pasture walk in Crawford County, Wis. Peralta and his wife, Alison, rent a farm near Steuben from her parents, Doug and Carol Spany. Peralta, originally from the Dominican Republic, is in his second year of grazing and milking 61 Jerseys, Holsteins and crossbreds.

He has an agronomy degree and knows a good deal about crops. But as for dairy cattle and grazing, Peralta said, "This is all new for me, here."

One of the main questions he said he wanted answered during the pasture walk conducted by the Great River Graziers was why some of his cows refused to let their milk down at milking time. Was it because he let their newborn calves stay with them a few days? Were they nervous about something? Could stray voltage be the problem?

"We were thinking they were nervous, or maybe there is some electricity," the young dairyman said.

As he spoke, some two dozen fellow graziers from Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa stood around him in a loose circle, in the shade of a thick oak tree, listening intently.

"What do you do when you have this kind of problem?" Peralta asked.

The visiting farmers offered several ideas. Could the insulation on the crowd gate wire be cracked, letting electricity seep out? How about the electric fencer? Peralta replied that he has tried switching off the fencer during milking, but doing so does not seem to help. If stray current was creating the problem, it could be emanating from farther away, one farmer said. He suggested "checking the voltage on your feeding system and everything," including the well.

As the conversation continued, Peralta offered more details. It was not just one group of cows holding back their milk. And, the situation seems a little worse this year, he said.

Nor were there any excessive mastitis problems or high cell counts to indicate that some sort of physical ailment was the culprit. Peralta said the somatic cell count has been at 160,000 or less.

Another clue emerged. Peralta mentioned that cows in the front of the milking parlor seem to be more affected.

That could be from other cows bumping them, one grazier suggested. Another one suggested that maybe the cow platform is too narrow for some cows to feel at ease.

Crawford County Grazing Specialist Dennis Rooney, a retired dairyman, half-seriously inquired, "Have you tried singing to them?" Peralta replied that he does have a radio playing at milking time, partly for the music's supposed soothing effects. Vance Haugen, Crawford County Extension agriculture agent, who led the pasture walk and guided the discussion, offered a comment about music at milking time. Haugen said the Amish gent who milks part-time for him "chants to the cows."

As for leaving calves with the cows for a few days, that doesn't normally create problems with milk letdown, Haugen said. However, Peralta mentioned that he uses five kinds of milkers. That, said Haugen, "could cause some problems," since a cow might not like the switch from one type to another.

Genetics were offered up as a possible solution. A dairyman recalled his problems getting some of his Norwegian Reds to consistently let down their milk. To that, Peralta answered that he had not noticed a link to the cows' genetics.

Peralta went on to say that he has resorted to using oxytocin off and on to get problem cows to let down their milk.

Haugen attested to the power of the hormone, saying he knew a dairy farmer who kept administering oxytocin in smaller



Crawford County Extension Agriculture Agent Vance Haugen (foreground) talks about grass and legume management during a recent pasture walk near Steuben, Wis. Dairyman Wandy Peralta, the pasture walk's host, listens. (photo by Ron Johnson)



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and smaller amounts to one cow. In the end, that cow would only let her milk down after she felt the prick of the syringe's needle - even though oxytocin was no longer being administered.

Parlor examined

With background information in hand, and several possible solutions in mind, the group visited the swing-12 milking parlor that's in an open-ended shed near the barn. Peralta, it was noted, does not milk during the colder months.

Crowded onto the cow platforms, the visiting farmers immediately spotted a couple of potential problems. One was an insulated wire in a plastic hose running across the inside of the metal roof. Another was a broken switch box near the front of the parlor.

Upon further investigation, two farmers reported feeling a hint of electricity in a metal railing near the broken box. That broken box, along with the possibility of improper grounding, was chosen as the likely cause of cows refusing to let down their milk.

Beyond that, Haugen suggested that electrical conduits in the parlor building could be "full of water." He also urged Peralta to make sure a couple of electric motors were protected.

Farmers, he said, can ask their electricity providers to conduct checks for stray voltage. The cost, Haugen said, is already paid in the form of a surcharge on farmers' electric bills.

As a final comment on the electrical situation in the milking parlor, Haugen remarked, "Those would all be good things to fix, to make sure you live."

New seeding

Peralta asked for opinions on his efforts at seeding clover and grass in some of his pastures. Specifically, he wanted to know, did going over the ground with a pasture harrow improve the stands? Or was the extra effort a waste of time?

"I don't see too much difference in the new clover and grass coming," Peralta said, as the group looked at one area.

That could be due to the copious rains parts of southwest Wisconsin received in June, one farmer noted. Rooney added that some areas got four inches the week before the pasture walk.

After seeing another area that was recently seeded, the farmers generally deemed it "excellent" for grazing, since it contained more clover and grass than the first paddock. Peralta was offered a couple of options for managing the second paddock.

He might, the farmers suggested, wait a week before letting his cows into it, because the plant height and thickness seemed to vary. Or, they said, he might give his cows 12 hours in that area, then move them to another area for the next 12 hours before moving them back to new grass in the first paddock. Alternating paddocks, the graziers explained, might make best use of both.

Peralta said his cows were averaging about 38 pounds of milk per day, and climbing. That was with 12 pounds of grain per day, besides pasture. Seventy-five percent of the grain was corn, with the rest soy hulls, Peralta said.

Haugen observed that current prices made milk worth almost 20 cents a pound. At that price, he said, \$6 corn can be worth the price.

A fellow dairyman urged Peralta to not cut back on the grain too much, even though his pastures looked good. The cows could wind up losing body condition and then needing to replace it later, possibly when the pastures have hit their "summer slump."

"There's a fine line," the farmer said, "between saving money and feeding the cows."