

National Dairy FARM Program: What You Need to Know

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Calf Photo Credit: A. Sandeen, Penn State

Today's consumers are very interested in where their food comes from. They want to know that the food they are eating is safe for their families and that the animals on your farm are well cared for. How can the dairy industry help show our consumers how much we care for our animals? Through Farmers Assuring Responsible Management, also known as the National Dairy FARM Program. The FARM program is open to all United States dairy producers, co-ops, and processors to earn the trust of consumers by showing how the dairy industry is taking the best care of their animals and environment while providing a safe wholesome product.

The National Dairy FARM initiative is updated every three years to assure that the industry standards for best management practices are up to date with scientific research related to animal care and well-being. Does your farm have an animal welfare plan in place through the National Dairy FARM program? Did you know on January 1, 2020 new best management practices standards were implemented? The most recent update, FARM 4.0, brings several changes to the program. These changes are primarily in three different areas: veterinary relationship with the farm, changes to specific management practices, and continuing education of family members working on the farm.

Previous versions of the FARM program have required your veterinarian to complete a Veterinary Client Patient Relationship (VCPR) form annually. A new requirement of version 4.0 is to have your herd health plan, in addition to the VCPR form reviewed and signed annually by your herd veterinarian. This plan must cover critical animal wellbeing areas, including pre-weaned calf care, non-ambulatory animal care, and euthanasia practices.

Among these important animal care areas, pre-weaned calf care has seen the most changes in FARM 4.0. In this version, disbudding must be completed by 8 weeks of age. Pain management for disbudding is also addressed in the most recent update. Without labeled veterinary products for pain control, there are no specific requirements, but there is an expectation that farms will work with their veterinarian to develop a pain management protocol that best fits their operation.

In addition to these calf care practices, another specific management practice that has changed in FARM 4.0 is that electronic or written drug treatment records are to be maintained and should be available to the herd veterinarian for review. Also, although the practice of tail docking was banned in the previous version of the FARM program, beginning with FARM 4.0, any farms continuing this practice face loss of certification if changes are not made immediately. Any farms that are required to make this immediate change will be closely monitored to assure all FARM standards are met.

The final area where FARM 4.0 makes significant changes is in education. Although there are no changes in employee education requirements, the education of family members working on the farm is addressed in the most recent version of FARM. Many professionals, such as doctors, veterinarians, and nurses, are required to take continuing education courses to maintain their professional licenses. FARM 4.0 recognizes that family members working on dairy farms are professionals. This version of FARM implements a continuing education requirement for family members working with pre-weaned calves, and non-ambulatory animals, as well as those making euthanasia and fitness for transport decisions. These requirements can be met in a variety of ways, from attending educational meetings to discussing animal care protocols with your veterinarian.

What do you need to do on your farm to ensure you implement these new best management practices? First, speak with your veterinarian to review your current herd health plan. Be sure your conversation includes pain management for disbudding

calves and best practices for recording drug treatments. To help meet your continuing education requirements, Penn State Extension offers many animal care related trainings throughout the year that will qualify for training for both employees and family members. Also, the National Dairy FARM website contains many resources to help producers develop animal management protocols in compliance with FARM standards. It is important that producers strive to meet these new standards so that the passion the dairy industry holds for proper animal care is communicated to our consumers in a uniform way through the National Dairy FARM Program.