Take away the pain

While pain mitigation adoption is currently low, farmers say they want to make dehorning a less stressful experience.

by Olivia Hennes

Dehorning has captured more attention recently, both on-farm and in the media. The average American is three generations removed from the farm, and as a result, these consumers sometimes do not understand the reasoning behind practices such as dehorning or disbudding. While this disconnect can be frustrating at times, consumer concerns motivate us to rethink certain on-farm protocols for the better.

UW-Extension Outagamie County Dairy and Livestock Agent Zen Miller began his dehorning research last year by conducting a survey of 200 people from diverse backgrounds at eight different events. At each event, participants were asked to watch a series of three short videos demonstrating different disbudding practices and levels of pain management: calf dehorned at 3 months of age with no lidocaine (pain medication), calf dehorned at 6 weeks of age with lidocaine, and a newborn calf disbudded with caustic paste. After watching each video, participants were asked to rank the level of animal pain for the better.

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One of the most striking results from Miller’s survey of 78 farmers, 49 percent indicated they dehorn calves before 60 days of age. Disbudding earlier with the use of an anesthetic or caustic paste is not much more expensive or time consuming and could easily be adapted on most dairy farms.

Considering polled options

The survey determined that 18 percent of responding farmers currently included polled bulls in their breeding programs. Many farmers, however, indicated they chose not to include polled bulls in their breeding selections because they felt polled bulls lack adequate genetics for other performance traits. They also commented that polled semen is more pricey.

Still, 27 percent of farmers were interested in learning more about polled genetics. In all, a current list of polled bulls was given to 39 of the farms.

This study demonstrated the desire of farmers to provide animals with less stressful treatments. As an industry, on-farm education about ideal practices is the best thing that can be done to change outdated procedures, including disbudding protocols.

If dehorning with a hot iron is your chosen method, view pain management as a necessity, not just an option. Veterinarians or other experienced individuals can aid in the development and implementation of new protocols. The use of pain management pre- and postdehorning will promote a consumer-friendly image and prevent unnecessary stress to our calves.