

Are standard operating procedures useful?

A standard operating procedure (SOP) is a set of step-by-step instructions compiled by an organization to help employees perform tasks in a repetitive manner.

Dairy producers from Germany were surveyed about the organization of work processes at their farms. Using a comprehensive questionnaire including 16 questions, the researchers (Hesse et al., 2017) analyzed the use, development, and utilization of SOPs in 248 dairy farms. Farms were classified as small (23% dairies; up to 100 cows), medium (53%; 101–500), and large (23%; >500).

Most of the producers (82%) indicated the existence of SOP at their farms (69, 83, and 93% of small, medium, and large farms, respectively). Feeding (73%), milking (73%), calf handling (64%), and management of fresh cow (54%) were the most common areas in which SOPs were put in place.

Across farmers, the primary benefits of using SOPs were consistent work performance, monitoring of work processes, and improvement of animal health. Annual milk production was 4.3% greater in dairies where SOPs were available;

however, bulk milk SCC was significantly higher on farms with an SOPs for milking procedures (168 cells/mL) than on farms without milking SOPs (181,318 cells/mL). Similarly, first-service conception rates were lower on farms with an SOP for heat detection (45.8%) than on farms without an SOP for detecting heats (51.6%).

As these findings point out, SOPs were not fully meeting farmer expectations. For example, standard operating procedures for milking and heat detection did not improve animal health but reduced udder health and reproduction performance. It can be speculated that either the SOPs were not well developed or were not implemented adequately. These may be the reasons:

1. **34% of the farms** using SOP did not have SOPs available in writing.
2. **48% of the employees** did not have free access to the SOPs at all times.
3. **70% of the dairies** did not use SOPs in their training programs.
4. **63% of the farmers** did not check the validity of their SOPs on a regular basis.
5. **44% of the dairies** did not involve employees in the creation of the SOPs.

In my experience, to overcome these issues, bilingual SOPs should be available to every worker in common areas, and posted in the areas where the tasks are performed. In a successful dairy management program, SOPs are the main tool for training and re-training employees. Moreover, SOPs should be updated frequently with inputs from employees, managers and farm advisors.

In conclusion, SOPs can be a great system for improving employee performance when they are efficiently implemented. **M**



Fernando Diaz, DVM, is a dairy nutrition and management consultant with Rosecrans Dairy Consulting LLC.

@fernando@
jration.com

“Bilingual SOPs should be available to every worker in common areas, and posted in the areas where the tasks are performed.”

SURVEY RESULTS:

Most common areas in which SOPs were put in place.

