Materials & Methods

Introduction

As the structure of the dairy industry changes so does management. Owner-operator farms are giving way to farms with complex management structures to support labor and task specialization. The important outcomes of these changes are: 1. critical management decisions are made by middle management and workers, 2. communication between owners and workers is indirect and mediated by middle management, and 3. communication strategies used by Veterinary and Extension service providers need to adapt to this evolving dairy management model.

Objectives

Describe the actual and perceived communication between management and workers regarding goal setting for calf feeding and health

Describe the actual and perceived communication between management and workers regarding daily tasks for calf feeding and health.

Materials & Methods

Two types of farms recruited: > 500 milking cows and < 163 milking cows, sample biased towards larger farms. The goal was to include a minimum of 32 large farms and 14 small farms. (Estimated prevalence of specific communication practices 0.5, precision of 0.15 and 95% confidence)

Semi-structured Qualitative Research Interviews of at least 3 to 5 people on each farm, e.g. owner, calf manager, calf care personnel, and herd veterinarian (as available) were conducted in Spanish or English using organizational communication flow charts and a survey of attitudes and practices.

Results

- 53 Farms enrolled from 5 states
- AZ, ID, NY, OR, WA
- number of preweaned calves on premise was 6 to 1500 calves, median ~ 80.
- 55 owners
- 51 veterinarians
- 37 feeders
- 30 calf managers
- 18 herd managers
- 10 herdsmen
- 17 treaters
- 7 other roles (including shared ownership)

Conclusions

- Labor structure was variable by calf herd size.
- Language abilities and preference are not uniform across different job categories.
- Communication on large farms is dependent on having bilingual communication strategies used by Veterinary and Extension service providers.
- Lines of communication when setting goals were perceived differently depending on job title.
- When setting calf health goals, owners and veterinarians saw most communication occurring between them. That communication was not perceived by calf managers or treaters.
- More than half of treaters reported communication between them and the calf manager when setting health goals.
- For communication of daily tasks for animal health, perception of “who’s talking” was more uniform from different perspectives.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank the farms and veterinarians that participated in the interviews and Dr. Pepi Leids, Dr. Melanie Hemenway, Dr. Scott Abbott, Dr. Steve Smallly, Hector Gonzalez, Lisa Jones, Sonia Lopez, Lopez, Dr. Di Short for advice and support. This project is supported by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Proposal # 2010- 01412.