Needs assessment for Cooperative Extension dairy programs in California

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INTRODUCTION

Cooperative Extension (CE) has been an important part of California's dairy industry for many years. As is the trend across the U.S., the number of dairies in California has been decreasing while herd size increases. In 2001, there were 2,157 dairies in California with an average of 721 cows per dairy, compared to 1,331 dairies in 2017, with an average of 1,304 cows per dairy. Similarly, participation in CE educational programs has shifted, as fewer individuals are directly involved with on-farm management. Furthermore, University of California CE staffing levels in the dairy programmatic area have decreased significantly, from eight county-based advisors in the state in 2001, to four currently. Resource limitations and a changing dairy industry motivated our effort to assess the priorities for CE dairy programs in the state of California.

OBJECTIVE

- **To identify dairy producer needs and how to best direct and deliver Cooperative Extension (CE) programming.**

METHODS

- In March 2017, a needs assessment survey was mailed to Grade A dairy producers in California, with duplicate ownership removed (n=1,080).
- Survey asked respondents' job title and general dairy information.
- Producers were asked to indicate the level of concern for a predetermined list of eleven issues. Rank of concern had three levels: very concerned, somewhat concerned, or not concerned.
- Survey also asked to determine the level of priority of a predetermined list of thirteen CE research and educational opportunities. Producers ranked topics as high priority, medium priority, or low priority.
- Producers were then asked to identify the target audience for CE information delivery and preferred delivery method.
- Descriptive statistics were calculated using PROC MEANS, UNIVARIATE and FREQ of SAS.

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RESULTS

General Information:

- Survey response rate: 15.4% (n=166)
- Respondents' dairy herd size ranged from 83 to 5,500 milking cows (Mean=1,405; median=1,150).
- Respondents' job title: dairy owners (88%), managers (6.6%), herdsman (1.2%), secretary (0.6%), and job title not indicated (3.6%).
- Veterinarian visit frequency: weekly (29.5%), bi-weekly (42.2%), monthly (14.5%), not regularly (12.1%), on-farm veterinarian (0.6%), and veterinarian visit frequency not indicated (1.2%).
- 87% of respondents used a consultant to balance rations.

Figure 1. Concerns/obstacles ranked by California dairy producers (n=166).

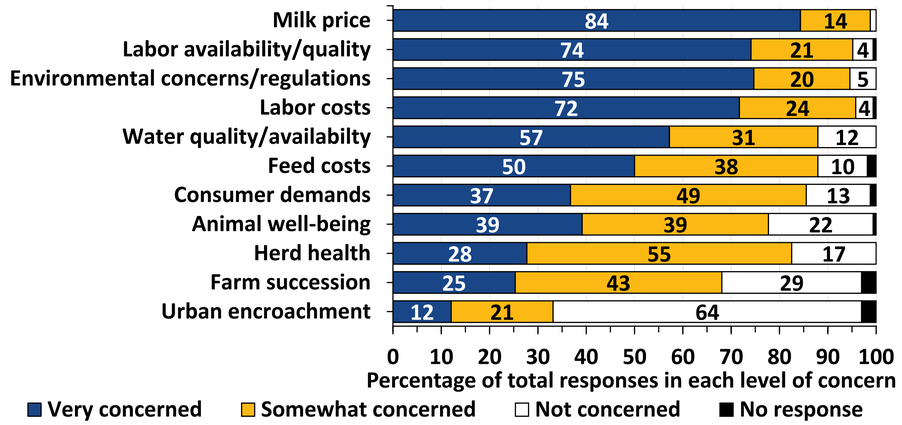


Figure 2. Cooperative Extension **research** priorities ranked by California dairy producers (n=152).

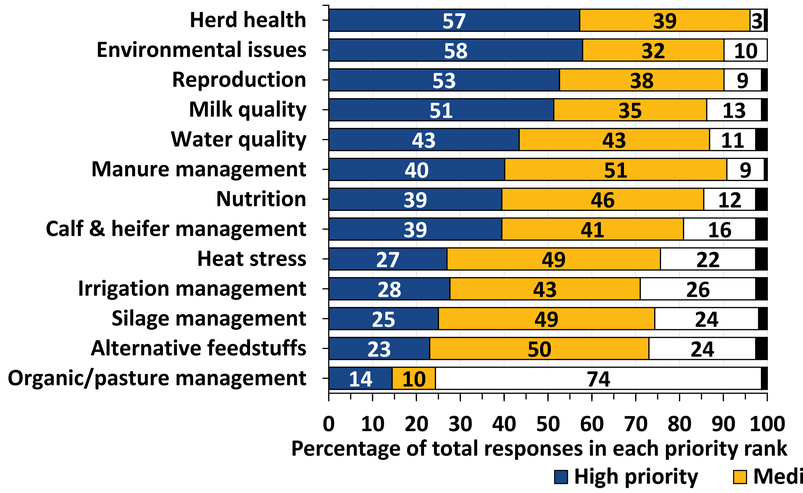
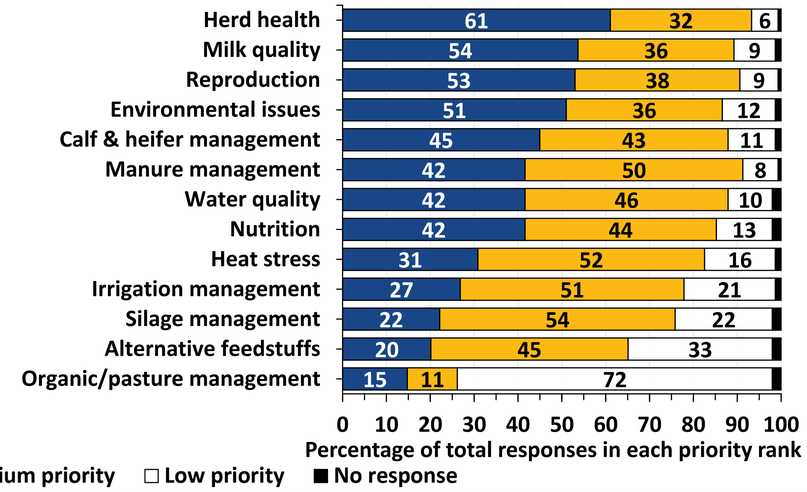


Figure 3. Cooperative Extension **educational** priorities ranked by California dairy producers (n=149).



RESULTS & SUMMARY

- **Desirable target audience for Cooperative Extension (CE) delivery of information:** dairy owners (93%), managers (66%), dairy employees (27%) and allied industry (23%).
- **Preferable information delivery methods:** newsletter/magazine articles (81%), half-day/short meetings (47%), on-farm training/meetings (39%), webinars (27%) and 2 or 3-day destination meetings (9%).
- Most respondents indicated that both **English and Spanish** should be used to deliver information to dairy employees.
- Dairy producers ranked **milk price, labor availability/quality/cost, and environmental concerns/regulations** their greatest concerns/obstacles.
- **Herd health, reproduction, milk quality, and environmental issues** were among the highest ranked research and educational opportunities identified by dairy producers.
- While herd health ranked 1st for research and educational opportunities, it was 9th on the list of concerns. This result may be explained by the differences of topics between the two lists, with the concerns/obstacles list including societal issues that were not included as potential CE priorities.
- Organic/pasture management was ranked a low priority by more than 70% of respondents, as these systems are geographically concentrated in the northern region of the state, but not prevalent in the majority of the state.
- Survey results will serve to develop future CE dairy programs in California.