

Does switch trimming make a difference?

by Lillian Frantz, Karmella Dolecheck, and Jeffrey Bewley

AS ALL dairy farmers enrolled in the National Dairy FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) Program are well aware, the National Milk Producers Federation Board of Directors passed a tail docking ban in the United States that went into effect on January 1, 2017.

Tail docking was originally adopted on farms because of assumed improvements in udder cleanliness, milk quality, and the comfort and health of milking personnel. However, the lack of scientific evidence to support any animal-based improvements resulted in the ban. Furthermore, pain and stress can occur at the time of docking, making it an animal welfare target.

Since the ban, producers have sought alternative options for managing tail switch length. One of those options is switch trimming. When implemented on farms, how does switch trimming compare to tail docking?

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To evaluate and compare cow cleanliness, fly populations, and fly-avoidance behaviors among cows with docked, switch-trimmed, and switch-intact tails, a study was conducted by the University of Kentucky on three dairy farms. Cows that had been previously docked (not for the study) existed on each farm. The remaining cows were assigned to either have nothing done to their tail (switch-intact) or to have their switch trimmed.

For cows that were assigned to the switch-trimmed group, switches were trimmed with the TailWell power tail trimmer one time at the beginning of the study. All cows were scored a number of metrics every two weeks for eight weeks total.

No real improvement

No significant differences were found in cow cleanliness scores, teat cleanliness scores, fly population scores, skin twitching, or foot stomping counts among docked, switch-trimmed, or switch-intact cows.

However, even though the amount of flies did not differ, there was a significant difference in tail swings among docked, switch-intact, and switch-trimmed cows. The odds of docked cows exhibiting tail swinging was 2.6



SOME FARMS use switch trimming as a way to maintain tail length.

times more than switch-trimmed cows and 1.92 times more than switch-intact cows. This potentially indicated some amount of discomfort or frustration in the docked cows.

Consider time and labor

Overall, this study agrees with previous studies that found docking does not improve cow hygiene compared to switch-intact tails. It also found that switch-trimming performed similarly to both. Additionally, no differences

in fly populations and minimal differences in fly avoidance behaviors indicate that all tail statuses are similar with regard to fly control.

Based on this study, farmers seeking alternative tail switch management methods may not expect hygiene or fly count improvements when trimming switches. Keep this in consideration when determining if switch trimming your herd is worth it, because it can be a time and labor-intensive task. 🐄

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