

# Why workers leave dairies

Gregory Encina Billikopf

## Employees initiate most separations

**T**urnover in a dairy's work force is expensive both in itself and because it can be a symptom of other problems. Turnover upsets routines that comfort animals and affect their health and safety. Other costs associated with turnover include the selection, orientation, and training of new employees. Furthermore, while an employee is being replaced, a substitute has to be found to do the work.

Changing jobs is traumatic for many workers; it is exchanging the known for the unknown. The period before a worker's separation is accompanied by reduced productivity and increased absenteeism. This absenteeism is sometimes physical (the worker doesn't show up) and other times mental (the worker is present, but his or her mind is somewhere else).

Some separations come quickly and are a surprise to both worker and employer. "I've never been out looking for another job," said a milker. "People come to me because they hear I'm good." Other separations are known long in advance to the worker, dairy operator, or both. "Two months at the last dairy I worked for were like two years," an outside man commented. "I love the dairy I work for now."

Turnover is not always detrimental. Sometimes positions are no longer needed and persons who leave are not replaced. Some dairy operators would rather not discipline or fire bad workers and are relieved when they leave.

Turnover can be classified by the degree of control the dairy operator has over the separation. For instance, the producer has little control over an employee's family problems, has only moderate control over scheduling, and has relatively high control over the relationship between management and workers.

Separations can also be classified as either producer-initiated (firings) or worker-initiated (quits). Regardless of how turnover is classified, dairy managers can benefit from a better understanding of why workers leave dairies.

## Turnover study

During a 1983 study to examine labor turnover, workers were interviewed in dairies located in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced counties. The study had specific objectives, including:

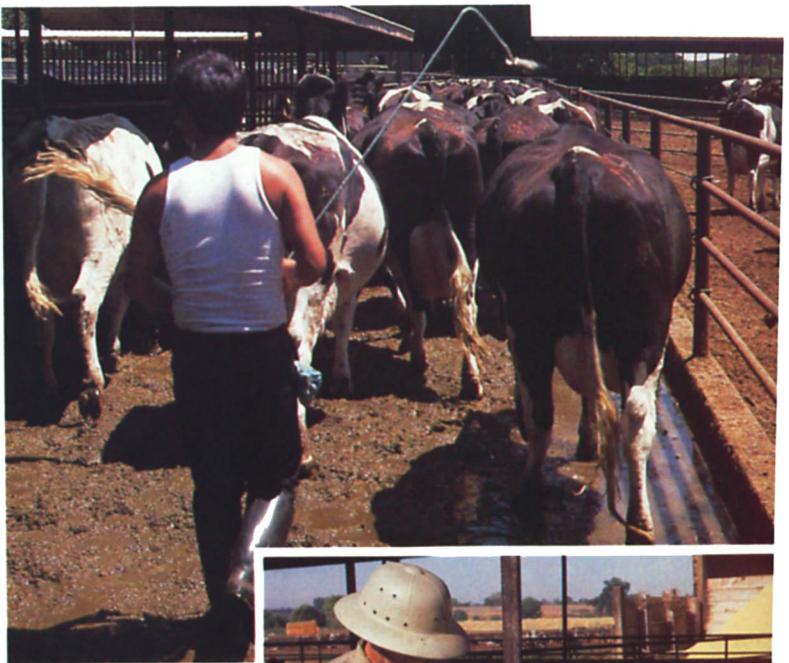
1. Determining whether there is a single reason or several reasons that induce a worker to leave;
2. Determining the reasons why dairy workers leave jobs, from their perspective (so management can better control unwanted turnover); and
3. Estimating generally the turnover rates for the dairy industry in these counties as a whole as well as for individual workers.

No attempt was made to collect data from workers who left dairy work permanently.

More than 100 workers — including milkers (54), outside workers (27), and herdsmen (18) — were interviewed with the consent of the respective dairy owner or manager.

Each worker was asked: (1) What is your job in this dairy? (2) How long have you worked in this dairy? (3) Have you ever worked in a dairy before? If yes: (4) What job did you do? (5) How long did you work there? (6) Why did you leave? (7) What could the dairy operator have done to keep you there? Questions 4 through 7 were repeated for each job they had had in dairies.

Workers knew the exact reason why they had left each job (question 6), but few had given much thought to what the dairy operator could have done to keep them there (question 7).



The "average" length of employment of dairy workers in California in 1983 was more than four years, much longer than 30 years ago.

The workers had a collective total of 147 job changes. Only one reason for 90 percent of the job changes was given by the respondents (left to get higher pay, got fired, etc.). Even when there were many reasons for leaving, one was predominant. Only one worker had more than two secondary reasons for leaving. Workers were asked only for the reasons why they left, not what they liked or disliked about previous jobs.

The principal and secondary reasons for leaving were classified into 10 categories (table 1), even though most responses were unique and had their own twists.

Dairy operators may find it interesting to compare the results with a study conducted 30 years ago by Varden Fuller and George Viles in Fresno County (table 2). Data in that study covered only one previous job per person.

One similarity between the two studies is in the percentage of workers who left because of compensation: 35 percent in 1953, and 33 percent in 1983. (The 1953 study differentiates between those who "left to get higher pay" (21 percent) and "too much work required" (14 percent).) Another similarity is frequency of turnover because of unsatis-

factory relations with other employees.

The major differences in the findings of 1953 and 1983: (1) personal problems involved 7 percent of the workers in 1953 and 19 percent in 1983; (2) economic problems of dairies were not mentioned in 1953, while 11 percent of the 1983 respondents listed them as reasons for leaving; (3) unsatisfactory relationships between workers and management accounted for 17 percent of the turnovers in 1953 and for 8 percent in 1983; and (4) employer-initiated terminations were the cause of 24 percent of the turnover in 1953 compared with 7 percent in 1983.

### Examples of responses in each category

**Compensation and benefits.** Under terminations related to compensation, most workers left because of either low pay or excessive work. Also, workers left because (1) they did not get an increase in pay corresponding to increases in responsibilities or (2) the dairy operator did not come through with pre-employment promises. A few left their jobs because health insurance was not provided.

**Personal and family problems.** Some workers left their jobs because of marital problems, including divorce. A female worker left one job because of a pregnancy. A worker left when his sister married the dairy operator; he did not want to work for family members.

Other workers moved because (1) they wanted to be closer to their families; (2) a family member needed a change in climate for health reasons; or (3) a family member could get a job in a nearby dairy when none was available at the present location. One worker quit when he was needed at his family's dairy. Several workers took vacations to the "old country," especially to get married.

**Economic problems of dairy.** Economic problems of dairies that led workers to lose their jobs included (1) the dairy operator selling out, (2) a change of ownership, and (3) a change in location of the dairy.

**Relations with other workers.** Several employees did not get along with their co-workers. They reported that their co-workers were lazy or got drunk during off-hours, or gave them different orders than they had received previously.

Some workers got along so well with a co-worker that, when the dairy operator fired that friend (or relative), they also left.

One worker quit because he got lonely working by himself in the milk parlor. However, another worker left because there were others working in the parlor and he liked working alone.

**Relations with management.** Workers who left because of faulty worker-management relations listed these reasons: (1) the worker did not get along with a supervisor; (2) the worker felt superiors did not know how to give orders; (3) the herdsman expected the milker to do personal work in addition to assigned work during working hours; (4) the dairy operator was never satisfied with the amount of work performed; (5) language difference was too large a communication barrier; (6) sexual harassment occurred; and (7) there were too many bosses issuing orders, including the dairy operator's spouse and children.

**Fired.** A couple of workers who were fired had no idea why. Some reasons for terminations were: (1) inability of worker to get along with the herdsman or dairy operator, (2) worker's insistence on receiving promised benefits, (3) worker's loss of eligibility to work in a school dairy after graduation, (4) increased dairy automation, and (5) excessive absenteeism.

**Housing and transportation.** Few workers quit because of the quality of their housing. One worker who got married, however, did report leaving to find more adequate room. Most of the comments under this category centered on the distance between housing and the dairy, or housing and town. This problem was accentuated for those who did not have a car or driver's license.

**Working schedules and time off.** Complaints associated with schedules

and time off centered on undesirable shifts (night or split), not enough time off, wrong days off, or unscheduled days off.

**Job duties.** One worker wanted outside work rather than milking. Another wanted milking rather than outside work. A herdsman disagreed about management of the dairy. One milker, asked to do some tasks by hand, felt there was a faster method. One worker was offered a job with what he considered better tasks. A worker got temporarily tired of the dairy business.

**Dairy design.** No one mentioned dairy design as a principal cause for leaving a job. Two secondary reasons mentioned concerned a flat barn design and lack of equipment.

### Turnover rates

In 1953, the average turnover for workers was once a year. In 1983, the average term of employment for respondents' previous jobs was almost two-and-a-half years; however, the average length of employment at the time of the interview was more than four years.

There is nothing "average" about the average. For instance, two workers who had worked in dairies for the same amount of time (fourteen years each) had average terms of employment of seven years and less than two years. From another perspective, two workers who had held the same number of jobs (four each) had an average stay of half a year versus four-and-a-half years per dairy.

TABLE 1. Principal and secondary reasons given by workers for leaving dairies, 1983

| Category                   | Principal reason    |    | Secondary reason    |     |
|----------------------------|---------------------|----|---------------------|-----|
|                            | Number of responses | %  | Number of responses | %   |
| Compensation benefits      | 48                  | 33 | 6                   | 31  |
| Personal problems          | 28                  | 19 | —                   | —   |
| Economic problems of dairy | 16                  | 11 | —                   | —   |
| Relations with workers     | 13                  | 9  | 1                   | 5   |
| Relations with management  | 12                  | 8  | 2                   | 11  |
| Fired                      | 11                  | 7  | —                   | —   |
| Housing, transportation    | 8                   | 5  | 1                   | 5   |
| Working schedules          | 6                   | 4  | 4                   | 21  |
| Job duties                 | 5                   | 3  | 2                   | 11  |
| Job design, method of work | —                   | —  | 3                   | 16  |
| Totals                     | 147                 | 99 | 19                  | 100 |

TABLE 2. Reasons given by workers for leaving dairies, 1953

| Reason for termination from preceding job | Percent of reasons given |
|---|--------------------------|
| Laid off, discharged                      | 24                       |
| Left to get higher pay                    | 21                       |
| Too much work required                    | 14                       |
| Unsatisfactory relations with management  | 17                       |
| Poor housing                              | 7                        |
| Unsatisfactory relations with co-workers  | 7                        |
| Personal and family reasons               | 7                        |
| No days off                               | 3                        |

Source: V. Fuller and G. L. Viles, *A California Labor Study: Labor-Management Relationships and Personnel Practices, Market Milk Dairies, Fresno, California*. California Agricultural Experiment Station, Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics, College of Agriculture, University of California. January 1953. Mimeograph Report No. 140, p. 42.

## Summary

Most separations involve single causes, although a summary of terminations in general involves many different reasons. Of all terminations, about 82 percent were employee-initiated. Those not worker-initiated were the result of economic problems of dairies (11 percent) and firings (7 percent).

About 80 percent of the turnover was under some degree of dairy operator control. Terminations not under the operator's control included workers' personal and family problems and relationships with other employees.

Results of this study don't point to one area of personnel management that dairy operators need to address to reduce turnover. Instead, many aspects of management are implicated. Management, for example, can give employees "exit interviews" to find out whether a pattern of problems exists. Such interviews would contain information from those who leave dairies for other lines of work.

Divisions of some categories into various degrees of employer control are arbitrary. Each dairy operator makes

policies as to how far he or she will go to avoid turnover problems and to categorize the turnover that occurs as avoidable or not avoidable. For instance, most cases revolving around unsatisfactory relationships with co-workers are listed as unavoidable. An employer, however, has several tools available to improve relationships among workers (such as offering group incentive pay and stressing to workers the importance of teamwork). On the other hand, turnover listed as controllable by management is not always so. For example, while most employers would like to pay their workers well, compensation and benefits are limited by the dairy's profitability.

Turnover is a symptom of other problems, especially dissatisfaction with work or working conditions. Measures taken to prevent turnover are bound to improve other operating results as well. The dissatisfaction that precedes turnover can greatly affect the dairy's productivity. Turnover in itself is also costly, since it is expensive to replace workers.

It is not good to prevent turnover at all costs; some worker departures will

benefit the dairy. This is not to say that a rancher should promote dissatisfaction of workers to make them leave. There are far better methods for terminating employment.

Turnover seems to be decreasing, suggesting a need for research on the causes of this stability. Information is needed on not only the effect of the economy (including the looseness of the labor market), but also the effect of specific personnel management techniques on turnover. For example, do more productive workers stay longer? What are the effects of different methods of compensation (including the use of incentives) on turnover? What do individual dairies with low separation rates do differently than their less successful neighbors? Of course, before many of these questions can be answered, dairy operators need to keep accurate records of their workers' lengths of employment and reasons for leaving.

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# Improved sampling for spider mites on Imperial Valley cotton

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In sampling for spider mites on cotton, time limitations are important, especially when *Tetranychus cinnabarinus* (Boisduval) populations can reach levels exceeding tens of thousands per plant. Counting all *Tetranychus* spp. on a single cotton leaf often requires an hour or more. Consequently, few researchers or pest control advisors take the time for careful sampling.

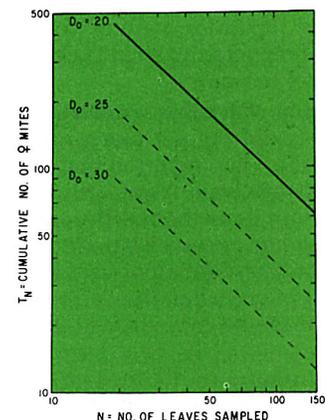
Sampling studies of spider mites on cotton had been made in California's San Joaquin Valley, where they are a primary pest, but a separate sampling study was needed for Imperial Valley cotton because of differences in climate, variety, and growth patterns. Also, in the San Joaquin Valley, there exists a complex of mites consisting of *T. urticae* Koch, *T. pacificus* McGregor, and *T. turkestani* (Ugarov and Nikolski). *Tetranychus cinnabarinus*, a mite closely related to *T. urticae*, is prevalent in Imperial Valley cotton. Because of such differences, research findings in the San Joaquin may not be applicable to the Imperial Valley.

The pink bollworm *Pectinophora gossypiella* (Saunders) is the main cotton pest in California's lower desert valleys (Imperial, Coachella, and Palo Verde), with *Heliothis zea* (Boddie) and *H. virescens* (Fabricius) also key pests. Multiple pesticide applications are needed each season to keep their populations below damaging levels. Spider mites are considered secondary cotton pests; however, during some years their populations increase to damaging levels. There is a need, therefore, to monitor mite populations compatibly with current control practices for key pests in Imperial Valley cotton.

Field research during 1982 and 1983 was directed to determining whether pesticides applied to control key pests would affect the within-plant distribution of *T. cinnabarinus* on mainstem node leaves, whether this distribution would change over the course of the season, and whether from this information a reliable, less time-consuming method for sampling field populations of *T. cinnabarinus* could be developed.

## Data collection

Tests were conducted on DPL-61 cotton at the Imperial Valley Field Station near El Centro. In 1982, treatments were replicated four times in a randomized block design. In 1983, treatments were replicated eight times in a randomized block design.



When the plot of a sample unit of mites in cotton falls above the desired precision line, sampling is stopped and the mean density is calculated.