



# Hoof health boosted

Ontario project builds on Alberta and B.C. experience to control most common cause of lameness

**B**uilding on projects already operating in Alberta and British Columbia, Ontario has launched a Dairy Hoof Health Project to collect data on digital dermatitis—the most common cause of lameness in dairy herds. The goal is to help implement on-farm strategies to help control this ailment and improve productivity.

A previous Ontario survey of hoof lesions, as well as data collected in the Alberta and B.C. Hoof Health Projects, indicate digital dermatitis—also called hairy heel warts, Mortellaro's disease and strawberry foot rot—is by far the most prevalent hoof lesion in dairy herds. Moreover, its prevalence appears to be growing. The economic loss from this disease for Ontario dairy farmers is currently estimated at more than \$3 million per year.

To control the spread of digital dermatitis infections, producers need to routinely identify infected cows and implement biosecurity strategies to limit their opportunities to infect herd mates.

The Ontario project's goal is to collect data on 30,000 registered dairy cows in 300 milk-recorded dairy herds by 10 members of Ontario Hoof Trimmers Guild (OHTG). These hoof trimmers will be using the Hoof Supervisor System, a portable computer system with specialized software allowing the collection of data on hoof lesions and their severity. This makes it possible to monitor the incidence, history and progress of digital dermatitis and other lesions in a herd.

The participating dairy farmers have agreed to share these hoof health records by allowing access to their CanWest DHI records. The information collected will be combined with the database developed by the Alberta Dairy Hoof Health Project,



Photo courtesy Blair Murray

Hoof trimmer Vic Daniel uses specialized computer system to input data.

which also contains information on B.C. dairy herds.

The project's other goals are to lay the groundwork for researchers to determine:

- whether cattle have a genetic component making them more susceptible to digital dermatitis by correlating hoof health data from individual cows with their genetic and genomic records;
- whether early-lactation cows are more susceptible, especially first calvers, for example. They may also determine incidence rates in heifers versus older cows;
- whether there are relationships between digital dermatitis incidence and production and reproduction measures or, there is a relationship between milk somatic cell counts and dermatitis incidence.

The project, which combines resources from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, OHTG, Dairy Farmers of Ontario

and Grandview Concrete Grooving, will benefit all dairy farmers.

As well as direct and indirect effects on involuntary culling, lameness results in milk production losses, reduced reproductive success and treatment costs. An individual case costs an operation an estimated \$400. Lameness is also the dairy industry's most visible animal welfare problem that consumers easily recognize.

Many North American and European studies have shown producers significantly underestimate the incidence of hoof health problems in their herds. Surveys like those in Alberta, B.C. and Ontario will estimate the real scope of hoof lesions and identify those that need to be immediately addressed.

This project was funded in part through Growing Forward, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative. The Agricultural Adaptation Council assists in the delivery of several Growing Forward programs in Ontario.