

# CowContact<sup>tm</sup>

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## On the Farm

Dr. John Roberts, DVM was in private practice in NE Wisconsin providing a herd health service to dairy farmers for 14 years. In January of 1994, Dr. Roberts joined the Rural Electric Power Services (REPS) program at the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. He was a former member of the Stray Voltage Analysis Team. His primary responsibility in the REPS program is to assist farmers with the veterinary issues relating to the stray voltage concerns on their farms. Looking back, Dr. Roberts has these comments:

Seven years ago I walked onto the first farm I was to visit for the DATCP. I walked onto that farm with the best of intentions and lots of ambition. I brought to that farm my veterinary diploma and 15 years of practical experience in a very successful private practice. But by the time I had concluded my work, the farmer was irate. Good intentions, experience, credentials and all: he tossed me off of the farm.

Not to be deterred, I went to the second farm. I did not get tossed off of that farm. In fact, I was to visit that second farm 10 times in the subsequent years. Despite all of those visits, I made absolutely zero headway in helping this farmer see what I knew he needed to do in order to resolve the frustrating problems on his farm. Sadly, there seemed to be a single focus of this farmer's concerns, and no amount of well-intended effort was going to change that.

Since that early rocky start, I have visited hundreds of farms with some type of stray voltage concern. It has afforded me plenty of opportunity to appreciate the frustrations and demands of attempting to assist dairy farmers with their concerns about stray voltage. Let me give you an example. Recently, I received a call from a farmer with a major-league somatic cell count (SCC) problem, which he thought was caused by stray voltage. This was a do-it yourself farmer. He was not well connected with a veterinary service or a nutritionist, and the milking system dealer was only there as a last resort. I could hardly blame him for not wanting to use his local resources after I reviewed some of the poor quality service he had been receiving.

Through the years of my professional practice, I have been amazed at the number of people in the dairy service professions who fail to treat farmers as clients worthy of

assistance and respect. For example, I have seen a veterinarian go to the trouble of peeling the labels off of medicine bottles and re-labeling them out of some backward idea that the farmer might figure out something about veterinary medicine and no longer need his service. Such shortsighted thinking keeps the farmer and the veterinarian in their own perpetual circles of unspoken mistrust.

This farmer with concerns about stray voltage and high SCC problems was no different. As I did my testing to confirm the service person's milking system evaluations, I discovered that none of the pulsators were working. The pulsators sounded okay, they looked okay, but they were all operating on constant milk vacuum with no rest or massage cycle. Such a problem not only has the potential to cause a high SCC and mastitis, but can also decrease production and cause nervous behavior during milking related to pain at the teat.

The farmer was surprised to see the vacuum level graphs and had no idea how to fix the pulsators. The older son, who did much of the milking, was likewise clueless. But the younger son immediately said: "Oh, I know how to fix that. There is a little air hole in the pulsators that needs to be cleaned out regularly."

Cleaning the pulsator air hole is a simple procedure, but the milk system serviceperson had not taken the time to explain this to anyone on the farm. The younger son had just been hanging around and happened to see the service person clean the holes out when he was there working on a unit. Not unlike the veterinarian who stuck his own labels across the bottles of medicine, the milk system service person may have been operating out of arrogance, fear or indifference. I know he wasn't there to foster trust, respect or offer full assistance. The farmer had concluded that his high SCC must be related to stray voltage, but the pulsator evaluation produced a different, easy, do-it-yourself solution. I can guarantee you that on this farm they will be cleaning out those little air holes.

When this farmer first called the Farm Center at DATCP, his concerns were about stray voltage. When I talked to him on the phone, his concerns were about stray voltage. When I visited him on his farm, his concerns were about stray voltage. I told him I could not help him with stray voltage, but I would help in any way I could with my veterinary resources. A couple of weeks after my visit to this farm I got a message from the utility's stray voltage investigator who had been working on the farm. The farmer was pleased with his improving SCC situation and his concerns had shifted from an unidentified stray voltage problem to other issues that could be managed.

Some important history behind these events I have related to you is that, prior to my farm visit, stray voltage investigators from the farmer's utility had responded to the farmer's

concern about stray voltage. They had responded professionally and quickly. They had explained the limits of what they were prepared to investigate. They had worked hard on the farm and did the testing well. They had not found a significant level of stray voltage, but the farmer had not been left wondering what was 'behind the label'. Had this not been the case, I suspect that the issue of stray voltage would have become entrenched in the farmer's mind as the only explanation for the high SCC. In their professionalism they had kept the door open to the real solution.

While the stray voltage investigators from the utility did not hear the farmer praise their work, he did tell me that they had done a good job in helping him with his electrical concerns. It's a message from farmers that I hear a lot more now than I did even a few years ago: "They did a good job." It's a message that may not often get back to the utility crew that did the work, but directly or indirectly, I hear from farmers of the progress that has been made in the quality of stray voltage investigative service being done by the electrical industry.

There are far fewer stray voltage investigators these days who operate under the assumption that they can help a farmer to be a better farmer or who think they can "fix" a farm. Neither do I hear stray voltage investigators from the utilities talking about dry cow management or milking procedures anymore. With experience we are all learning to stick to our areas of expertise. We all know too well what happens when a nutritionist or veterinarian starts talking about electricity and stray voltage.

The farm that I've been discussing would never be the featured farm on the cover of Hoard's Dairyman magazine, but if we have learned anything in the last 10 years of stray voltage investigations, it is that our opinion of the quality of farm management has no relevance to the level of assistance provided. The resulting new level of professionalism has been effective, and it has been noticed.

Of course, despite anyone's effort, new dilemmas, issues, and perceptions regarding electricity and farm animals crop up every year, and we will never see an end to people selling their form of the "cure" to farmers. Just this year, a dealer from another state has appeared selling buckets of miracle powder with claims that it will cure almost anything. I recently visited with a farmer who was losing \$12,000 a month from reproductive and SCC problems in his dairy herd. He did not seek veterinary assistance but instead chose to purchase \$1,000 a month worth of this miracle powder. Making matters worse, along with the buckets came the propaganda – the antigovernment, anti-big business, anti-science, conspiracy-theory-spouting rhetoric that left little room for anything but the self-promoting sale of product.

Frustrations like these remain, but I am encouraged. I am encouraged because more and more farmers tell me that in regards to stray voltage the industry testing is being done well. Court cases go on. The stakes may seem higher than ever, but day in and day out, from what I hear from the farmers that I visit, we have come a long way. I have seen real progress. When a farmer calls and seeks assistance for stray voltage I think a difference is being made, and while you may not be hearing it straight from the farmer, I hear it.

**Dr. John Roberts, DVM**

Thanks Doc!

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