A standard operating procedure or SOP is a document consisting of step-by-step instructions on how to complete a particular job or procedure on the dairy farm. SOPs can be adopted for tasks such as milking routine, washing the milking machine, calf feeding, treating a cow for mastitis and many more tasks that farmers perform on a daily basis. They can be equally relevant on farms with other enterprises too.

**Benefits of a well-written SOP**

A well-written SOP will:

- Provide direction.
- Improve communication.
- Reduce training time.
- Improve consistency.
- Allow somebody to help out in the case of an emergency.
- Support a more profitable business.

SOPs are an excellent tool for farmers and their employees to work towards common goals. It also creates a positive sense of teamwork. SOPs, used in combination with planned training and regular performance feedback, lead to an effective and motivated workforce.

**Steps to developing an SOP**

This should be an inclusive process. It should consider the input of everyone involved in the procedure. Dairy farmers/managers who consider the input from their workers will increase “buy-in” and produce a better SOP. People will support what they help create.

There are seven steps to producing an excellent SOP:

1. Planning.
2. First draft.
3. Internal review.
4. External review.
5. Testing.
6. Post.
7. Train.

**Planning**

The first step is to link the SOP with the procedure. Dairy farmers/managers should tie in measurements such as somatic cell count (SCC), total bacterial count (TBC) and thermotolerant bacteria levels in milk.

**First draft**

The next step is to make a detailed list of the steps in the order that they are done. Don’t try to be perfect with the first draft because it is very likely that you will need to make changes. Writing a first draft provides a starting point for the review and discussion that will take place subsequently.

**Internal review**

Provide each employee who performs the procedure with a copy of the draft SOP. Ask them to review and suggest changes that are easier to understand, more accurate or will improve performance. Allow employees that their input is important and will be considered. Workers will feel ownership and commitment to an SOP if they believe that the owner or manager included their ideas during development. Many employees, or other family members, will have good ideas.

**External review**

Dairy farmers/managers should seek advice and feedback from people such as their advisor and other farmers when creating an SOP. Give them a draft of the SOP and ask them to suggest any changes that will make it clearer and more effective.

**Testing**

For procedures to be effective, they must perform in the workplace. There is only one way to be certain that a procedure is well written and performed as expected. Have a person (preferably someone unfamiliar with the task) test the SOP by performing each step exactly as it is described. Any step that causes confusion for the test worker should be revised.

**Post**

Make a final draft of the SOP and display it in the appropriate location. A master SOP file should be kept in a central location where workers can review all SOPs when necessary. The workplace SOP should be laminated and printed in large text so that workers can review while completing their work. It is also essential to keep SOPs up to date.

**Train**

The last step in the SOP writing process is to train the workers to follow the SOP correctly – not just what to do or how to do it. Workers are much more likely to follow procedures exactly when they understand why they are important.

SOPs are powerful tools for bringing dairy farmers, managers and employees together to focus on improving dairy production tasks. When everyone gets involved, goal-setting is performed, monitoring is built in and feedback is provided. This will enable the business to become more successful and also encourage employees to perform at a higher level.

**SOPs should be:**

- Written in a clear and readable style.
- Specific to your farm.
- Oriented to business goals.
- Written logically.
- Located beside the workstation where they are needed.
- Laminated.
- With pictures where beneficial.
- Kept to a single page.
- Broken down into appropriate chunks.
- Built from feedback from internal and external personnel.
- Created with input from staff. Get buy-in from your employees by involving them in the process from the beginning.
- Measurable.
- Useful.
- Preferably tested by somebody unfamiliar with the task.
- Update and reviewed regularly.

**Key messages**

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**Mark Cassidy and his daughter Seona with an SOP for dealing with mastitis.**