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Dairy CONNECTION

July 2009

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Reduce Lost Feed Dollars

If you've had the opportunity to visit with your neighbors or to read any dairy on-line discussion boards, you know the main topic of conversation is the low milk price. How do we as dairy producers make it through this year without any immediate price relief in sight in 2009? When you've tightened your belt as far as it will go, and it's still not enough, what next?

Let's take a look at feeding. While there may be some opportunities to reduce costs here, it is most important to keep the nutrient requirements for your herd as the highest priority. Saving a few dollars a ton on an ingredient, by-product, additive, or concentrate may have a large impact on milk production. Have as your goal to maintain milk production, reproductive efficiency, and general health while managing costs to avoid overruns or extra expenses. Following are some areas you should review in your feed management program.

Feed Refusals

One area to look at is feed refusals and losses. Bill Stonel, a researcher with Diamond V Mills, recommends to have one basic principle in feed bunk management is that a dairy must have goals for the level of orts or refusals. These goals shouldn't be the same for each dairy, and will vary based on their management philosophies and practices. However, all dairies should realize that restricting intake in lactating cows that are trying to increase intakes could limit production. Because of this concern, fresh groups are often fed with the greatest amount of refusals (~ 3 - 5%), while high groups may be fed closer to their actual intakes (1 – 4% orts), and later lactation animals even closer (.5 – 3%). There is a range around these recommendations because of differences in management (accuracy of forage dry matters, ability to maintain and communicate pen counts, ability to exclude spoiled forages from the TMR, frequency of feed push-ups, etc.) and philosophies across dairies.

What should you do with the feed refusals? Discarding is the easiest approach, since it eliminates any concern about disease transmission, spoilage level, or the effect the orts may have on the nutrient levels in the animals receiving them. Additionally, Examples of this type of ort include a refusal that is hot, slimy, and stinky, or if the refusal is essentially only sticks, long stalks, and weeds. Herds feeding to a very low (< .5 - 1%) refusal rate are more apt to take the discard approach. Of course, discarding orts starts to become prohibitively costly as the refusal percentage increases.

Historically, orts have been fed to the heifers. They are usually a pretty good nutritional match for younger heifers (5 – 10 months), particularly if the ort amount exceeds 3% and sorting has been minimal. The main concern with feeding orts to young heifers is disease transmission, followed by diet variability. The level of Johne's in a herd, and the ability of management to keep manure out of the orts, should be evaluated when considering the feeding of refusals to heifers. It should only be considered in herds with a very low level of Johne's, where crossovers are scraped and brushed after cows have returned from the parlor, where only clean equipment is used to handle the orts, and where people do not step in the feed with manure on their boots, and then only to the older (bred) heifer groups. Even then, it should probably be reconsidered.

Orts are often fed to the dry cows or a later lactation cow group. They shouldn't ever be fed to the prefresh or fresh cows. Orts should be viewed as a ration ingredient and fed at the formulated amount, not at whatever amount is available. It is also a good practice to occasionally submit a multiday ort composite for laboratory analysis. Due to sorting, the ort is almost always wetter, higher in fiber, and lower in protein than the TMR. Another approach to ort management is to have a goal of at least 5% refusal, and then refeed the refusals to all lactating cows except the fresh cows. When using this practice, the orts from each pen should be discarded on a rotating basis once or twice a week to prevent the accumulation of inedible feedstuffs. Feeders need to be evaluating the quality of the refusal with this approach, since we do not want the ort to be a yeast and mold inoculant for the rest of the TMR.

Grouping

Evaluate cattle grouping to maximize feed nutrients by feeding where the available nutrients will have the most return. Grouping management of lactating cows on most freestall dairies generally consists of two

common approaches: a) fresh and "high" cows, or b) fresh cows, high cows, high heifers, and low or later lactation cows. It can be helpful when considering feeding management to simplistically think of three types of lactating cows: fresh and early lactation animals with increasing intakes and which may be fill-limited; peak intake cows that are often fill-limited; and later lactation cows with slowly decreasing intakes that are eating to meet or exceed their energy requirements.

Reduce Ration Variation in Mixing

Obviously, the performance of the feeder is an integral component in the accurate preparation of a load of feed. The nutritional consultant, along with the dairy owner or manager, needs to closely work with this individual. The feeder must understand how many seemingly small things can have a huge influence on animal performance. Specifically, they should have an understanding of the following areas:

- Dry matter – what it is, why it is important, and how it should be calculated. Bucholtz (1999) reports that most feeders attending MSU Feeder Schools were uncomfortable with arithmetic, and had a poor understanding of the DM concept.
- Face management – methods to keep the silage face straight, with minimal disturbance of packed silage, and minimal amounts of loose feed left at the end of feeding.
- Silage collection for load preparation – silage varies across the vertical face of the silo. Thus, silage used to prepare a load of feed needs to be obtained by uniformly removing silage across the height of the silo.
- Spoiled silage – poor quality silage that may be located along the top and sides of the silo should be removed so that it does not impair animal performance.
- The potential effect on animal performance of layers of feed within the bunker that are of poor quality.

<u>Load preparation</u>

- Ingredient sequencing – what order works best?
- The importance of accuracy when loading an ingredient into the mixer wagon.
- Mixer operation - When it should be started, length of time and speed that it should run, and minimum and maximum load sizes. Feeders need to be aware that mixer wagons can rapidly reduce ration particle size (Heinrichs et al., 1999).
- Mixer wagon maintenance

Being a feeder is a difficult, highly important position on a large dairy. Effort should be made to make it easier for a feeder to achieve the results desired of them. Ingredient mixes should be purchased or made on the dairy. This greatly minimizes the number of separate ingredients that must be added to each load, and increases the feeder's speed and accuracy. Load sheets should be printed in a font size that is easy to see, and with multiple forage DM increments and animal numbers. Scale displays should be easily visible from the loading tractor, and should have a remote that allows the scale to be tared after the addition of each ingredient.

Feed For Low Refusal Wastes

Accurate dry matters are a necessity for dairies wanting to operate the bunks at a low rate of refusals. Ideally, a dairy will have multiple Koster testers or vortex dryers and make checking forage dry matters part of the daily routine. As a minimum, ensiled forages should be tested weekly for DM. More frequent analyses should be run if there is significant variation.

Another key component of successfully feeding for a low refusal rate is that herd managers and feeders must have a good communication system in place so that the feeder is aware of pending changes in pen cow numbers. Also, it's helpful if cows rarely get mixed up with cows from other pens.

Feed should be pushed up as often as necessary to keep it within easy reach of the cow. Even though this practice may only encourage a small percentage of cows to come to the bunk (DeVries et al., 2003), it does keep feed available and distributed along the length of the bunk. A large refusal rate, 10% for example, is insufficient if cows can't reach the feed or it is only distributed along a limited length of the bunk.

Consult Your Nutritionist

Before making any drastic changes in your ration or in your feeding management or methods, be sure to discuss them with your Doboy Area Nutritionist. He or she can help you evaluate different feeding options and determine which methods, rations, or ingredients will be the most cost effective while also being the best nutritional choices for your herd.

Information from: FINDING LOST FEED DOLLARS BY REDUCING VARIATION IN RATIONS, Bill Stone1, Diamond V Mills, Technical Support and Field Research, Auburn, NY

Promotion Information