

Feeding Decisions and Management Can Impact Your Dairy's Bottom Line

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By: Donna Amaral-Phillips, Ph.D.

As feed, fuel, and fertilizer costs skyrocket, cost containment is front and center on everyone's mind. It is important to note that *improving income over expenses not just decreasing expenses* should be your goal when looking for ways to improve or maintain profitability. This concept is very important when it comes to decisions related to your feeding and management practices. In addition, feeding programs should positively impact the health and longevity of cows. Outlined below are areas that relate to your feeding management program that can directly impact your profitability. Please take a few minutes to see if you can improve upon these low or no cost management areas to improve your profitability.

1. Take Care of the Money Makers– Early Lactation Cows: Early lactation cows are generally the most profitable cows in a dairy operation. During early lactation, these cows have the highest efficiency of converting feed into milk. These feed dollars and management time needs to be directed toward getting this group of cows to milk to their potential and ensuring they get pregnant. Adequate feedbunk space, frequent feed delivery and constant access to fresh feed, properly balanced rations, feeding high-quality forages and easy access to clean, cool water are the hallmarks of a well-executed feeding and management program. Grouping early lactation and high producing cows together may also allow the use of more expensive feed additives and ingredients in those needing these products. Regrouping cows works as long as frequent pen movements do not disturb the social structure of the group and result in lower milk production.

2. Harvest or Purchase High Quality Forages: Bottom line– Feeding high quality forages allow rations to be balanced with less grain (savings in feed costs) and these higher digestible forages support the production of more milk. Thus, quality forages have a direct impact on the profitability of your operation. If 5 lbs of alfalfa hay is fed, you could pay \$80 more per ton for alfalfa hay and have the same income over feed costs if milk production increased by just 1 pound (assumes milk price is \$20/cwt milk; at \$15/cwt milk, this break even number is \$60 more per ton.) So, if you get 2 lbs more milk, you can pay \$160 more per ton with identical income over feed costs. In addition, the grain mix may be able to be changed reducing feed costs even more. Take home message: Sometimes paying a little more for a higher quality forage will make you more money even though you spend a little more for the forage itself.

3. Milk Cow Diets Need to Contain Some Corn or other starch sources: Rations for milking cows need to be balanced to provide adequate amounts of starch (24-26%

starch, 3-5% sugars). Ruminally degraded starch (abbreviated RDS), commonly found in corn and other grains, provides energy for rumen bacteria to make microbial protein, the primary source of protein for the cow herself. When inadequate amounts of starch are provided in diets for early lactation cows, milk production is reduced because microbial protein synthesis is reduced. Bottom line: make sure you work closely with your nutritionist to get a well balanced ration for your herd.

4. Review feeding programs: Formulating rations start by analyzing the forages you are feeding currently. These results are then used to balance rations for the milking herd, dry cows and heifers based on current production and amounts of forages available to be fed. Rations should be rebalanced at least quarterly if not monthly.

5. Purchase feed ingredients in bulk with neighbor(s): By purchasing feed ingredients in tractor-trailer loads, feed costs should be lower.

6. Get Cows Rebred: Cows need to be rebred in a reasonable time frame for them to be a part of the profitable dairy operation. This reasonable time frame is influenced by the production level of a particular cow. Higher producing cows can take longer to get bred than lower producing cows. The prudent use of heat synchronization, routine pregnancy checks via a veterinarian, and properly implemented and up-to-date vaccination program can help you get more cows rebred in a reasonable time frame. The goal here is to maximize the amount of time cows spend at the higher production versus lower production levels and thus resulting in higher profitability.

7. Improve Cow Comfort: Reductions in heat stress on not only the milking herd but also dry cows, baby calves, and heifers can improve these animal's immunity, feed intake, and thus profitability now and into the fall. Comfortable stalls that are well bedded and properly sized allow for cows to rest and "make milk".

8. Strive for Milk Quality Bonuses: Proper milking practices, routine milking equipment maintenance, and housing cows in a clean environment are important parts of producing higher quality milk. Feed additives can help improve the immunity of cows but cannot fix management problems leading to high cell counts.

9. Dry and Transition Cows: Feeding and management programs for dry and transition cows directly impact production, breeding potential, health, and thus profitability after calving. Dry cow rations need to be properly balanced such that they maintain body condition and transition cow diets need to prevent metabolic diseases, such as ketosis and milk fever. Overfeeding energy to dry cows (i.e. large quantities of corn silage in unbalanced rations) can waste feed resources and compromise the health of these cows after calving. Remember to work with a well-trained nutritionist to balance rations for your dry cows which not only utilize your forages but meet and do not exceed the nutrient needs of these cows especially for energy.

10. Calve heifers at 24 months of age: Calving heifers over 24 months of age increases heifer rearing costs and increases the time she is an income-utilizing versus an income-generating asset. Older heifers are less efficient at using feed for growth and consequently cost more to maintain. A survey conducted in 2007 with Wisconsin dairies or custom heifer raisers calculated that feed costs accounted for 52% of the total cost (\$1.06/heifer/day) to raise a heifer until freshening. Remember these costs were calculated before the large spike in corn and soybean meal prices. Thus, these costs are probably closer to \$1.20 or more/heifer/day today. Reviewing your heifer management program can help decrease costs associated with raising heifers.