

Managing Labor Responsible for Feeding the Lactating Dairy Herd



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Recruiting, training, and managing labor responsible for feeding the lactating dairy herd can have a major influence on the delivery of effective and cost-efficient nutritional programs which can impact a dairy's overall performance and profitability. The ultimate goal is to provide a consistent amount and composition of feed on a timely and consistent schedule to match each group of cows' dietary needs and forage resources found on the farm. Many dairy managers rate the job of feeder as one of utmost importance to the financial and performance stability of their dairy and one that requires a unique set of skills and attention to details. This article reviews some of the unique training necessary for new hires and routine monitoring of work performance of feeding personnel to ensure accurate and consistent delivery of feed to the lactating dairy herd.

Sharing a Written Job Description

When a dairy farm hires new employees, it should provide a written job description outlining the duties of the position and any special skills needed, such as the ability to safely operate farm machinery. This document should be shared and reviewed during the interview process. For potential employees whose native language is not English, written job descriptions should be provided in the appropriate language. These discussions can help dairy managers determine not only whether the potential employee is a good fit for the position and their dairy operation but also areas where additional training may be necessary to follow procedures unique to this farm's feeding program.

Once hired, employees feeding the milking herd and management should review these documents at least yearly to make sure they reflect the current position and expectations of both the manager and the feeders. After this meeting, any modifications should be made and a printed copy provided to the employees.

Training Employees

New hires should be shown the proper way to complete tasks associated with feeding. This training needs to include both the proper methods for doing a task and practical, simple explanations for why following the protocol is necessary. For example, employees should be shown how to remove silage from a bunker silo with a silo facer or bucket from the top down

instead of in the middle or bottom of the face. Employees need to understand that removing silage from the top down versus another means decreases the amount of heating of the silage, improves intake of the feed being fed, and ultimately positively affects milk production and the dairy's profit. Explaining why the procedure needs to be done a certain way may prevent employees from modifying procedures that result in suboptimum performance.

Safety procedures for operating equipment should also be included when training or reviewing feeding procedures.

New hires should be provided with written procedures (often called SOP's or standard operating procedures) on how to complete all feed-related tasks so they will have them to refer to when they must complete a task on their own. These procedures should be reviewed and updated when changes are made on how tasks are completed on the farm.

Besides training new hires, having up-to-date written protocols can help maintain consistency among employees and help relief feeders accomplish the tasks correctly.

As a starting point, managers should provide **written protocols** on these feeding steps as they apply to their operation:

- **On what the feeder should do prior to each feeding** (and loading TMR mixer):
 - Determine the amount of feed not consumed by each group of cows and adjust the amount fed, if necessary, to reflect changing cow numbers and intake per cow.
 - Report any major changes in feed consumption to the manager and/or nutritionist.
 - Clean feed bunks of uneaten feed daily.
 - Check waterers in each pen to make sure they are operating properly. At least weekly, empty the waterers, scrub them with a brush and weak chlorine solution (1 cup of regular-strength household bleach per 5 gallons of water), and dump the cleaning solution and replace it with clean, fresh water.
 - Communicate to management or the person ordering feed when the feed supply needs to be reordered (unless feeding software has this capability).

- **On loading of the TMR mixer**, including:
 - the proper order and location within the mixer for loading each feedstuff.
 - the position of the mixer when loading dry ingredients to minimize losses due to winds.
 - the proper silage management practices to be used for:
 - **Bunkers:** A small amount of plastic should be removed from the top, and top spoilage should be removed and discarded. Silage needed should be removed with a bucket or silo facer from the top down, and a very small quantity of silage should be left unused at the silo face.
 - **Bags:** A small amount of plastic should be removed and discarded in the proper receptacle, and feed should be carefully removed to minimize disturbing the silage face.

- The amount of each feedstuff to load per group. Include instructions on how to increase or decrease each feedstuff based on previous intake and changes in dry matter content of wet ingredients.
 - If ingredients are premixed before adding to the TMR, provide procedures and amounts of each ingredient needed to make preliminary mixes.
- RPM's and length of time mixer PTO needs to run to mix feed.
- Observation of feed being mixed to detect dead areas within the mixer where feed is not mixing properly.



Figure 1. Here is an example of using a bucket to remove feed from the middle of the silage face rather than from the top down, a practice to be avoided.

- **On feeding each group of cows:**
 - the appropriate amount of feed to deliver to each group of cows in a timely manner.
 - making sure feed is available for cows upon return from the milking parlor.
 - ensuring equal amounts of feed are delivered throughout the entire length of the feed bunk.
 - the tractor RPM's needed during feedout.
 - seeing that feed is delivered uniformly mixed and that it does not contain clumps of unmixed feed (i.e., unprocessed hay or baleage).



Figure 2. This photo shows an uneven feed distribution. The cows on the far end of the feed bunk have much more feed than the cows nearer the camera.

- **On collecting feed samples needed by the nutritionist:**
 - Seeing that wet ingredients (i.e., silages or wet by-products) are sampled according to procedures suggested by the nutritionist, that dry matter content is determined, and that adjustments are made to feeding software or amounts added to the mixer based on dry matter results.
 - Collecting samples of feed ingredients according to procedures established by the nutritionist.

- **On routine maintenance of feeding equipment:**
 - If the feeder is not responsible for maintenance, set up a protocol for how to report possible issues.
 - Establish a protocol on what to do if equipment is not operational at feeding times.

Providing Continuing Education

Training and providing educational information for feeders, as for all employees on the dairy, should be a continuous process. Providing continuing educational opportunities either on-farm, locally based, or through the Internet can help employees understand why they must complete various practices as directed. With improved understanding of each task and the underlining scientific concepts, dairy operations can see improved performance and may be able to incorporate improved ways of managing and completing feeding tasks.

Communication among Feeders, Management, and Nutritionists

One of the biggest challenges and opportunities for improvement is improving communication among the feeders, management team, nutritionists, and other farm employees. It is important to conduct routine meetings (weekly, bimonthly, or monthly, depending on the farm operation) to:

- discuss the feeding program
- review the feeding software and production reports
- discuss opportunities for change and positive progress toward the dairy's feeding goals.

Discussing changes and progress as a group gives employees a better understanding of why changes are needed. These meetings can provide input needed by managers and nutritionists to help in the decision process and can make employees feel as if they are a part of the decision process. These meetings are also an excellent forum for employees to offer suggestions for needed changes and help identify equipment and facilities needed to improve the feeding program in the future.

Take Home Messages

Managing labor responsible for the daily implementation of the feeding program for the lactating cows directly impacts production and profitability of a dairy operation. Routinely reviewing and updating job descriptions and standard operating procedures related to feeding, conducting meetings to review dairy cow and employee performance and future direction, and encouraging and facilitating continuing educational opportunities form the foundation for managing a dairy's labor responsible for feeding the lactating herd. By providing a clear direction of expectations and a forum for their suggestions and concerns to be heard, employees understand how they are contributing to the success of the dairy business and that they have a stake in its future.