

# Managing the Feed Bunk



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Milk production all starts with proper nutrient delivery to your dairy cows. An unbalanced ration could result in less than optimum health, reproductive performance and milk production, and then lowered income for the farmer. Supplying your herd with a balanced ration and implementing proper procedures for providing that ration will make all the difference.

Some key points for farmers to consider when managing the feed bunk include:

- **Am I providing my lactating herd, dry cow herd, heifers and calves proper rations for their dietary needs?**  
Working closely with a nutritionist is necessary for proper ration planning and utilization of available forages. Rations should be formulated for all groups of cows and heifers on the farm. These diets should optimize the milk production or growth, health, reproductive performance, and environmental management. Rations should be reviewed monthly to every 6 weeks and reflect changes in the quality and type of forages being fed.
- **Am I cleaning the milking herd's feed bunk daily to prevent mold and spoiling of feed?**  
Leaving excess feed in the feed bunk will result in spoilage of materials. Especially during summer months, excess feed will heat and reduce feed consumption. At the same time, dairy cows need to be fed so that there is some feed left at the next feeding (2-5% is recommended).
- **Do all my cows have adequate feed bunk space (2 ft. per cow)?**  
Limiting feed bunk space can limit feed intake, and then milk production. Cows require 24 to 30 inches of feed bunk space each, and fresh cows are recommended 30 inches per cow so more timid cows can receive maximum nutrient intake. Feed bunks need neck rails that are a minimum of 48 inches from the ground, with concrete manger walls that are 13 to 15 inches from the ground to prevent brisket injury.
- **Do I frequently feed my herd to increase intake and promote further trips to the feed bunk?**  
Cows should have access to feed 20 to 22 hours daily. Dairy cows feed approximately 10 times a day, with larger meals after returning from the milking parlor. Feed should be mixed twice daily and offered to cows immediately after returning from milking. Dairy cows consume more feed when it's fresh. Feeding cows twice daily will promote further trips to the feed bunk, and will increase the total amount of dry matter they consume. Frequent feeding may also improve fiber digestion and improve milk fat percentage.
- **Am I pushing up feed at least twice daily to promote maximum intake?**  
Pushing up is necessary for cows to have easy access to feed.

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- **Is clean, cool water readily available?**

Water should constantly be supplied to promote feed consumption. Water containers should be placed around the barn, with 3 feet of linear space for 15 cows. Water containers should be cleaned out daily, and cleaned weekly with a brush and a diluted bleach solution (1 cup household bleach per 5 gallons of water).

In summary, we realize that the dairy business is one that requires a lot of attention to detail. Putting effort into managing the feed bunk will lead to improved herd health and increased milk production. To get the pay off, you must follow these key principles and put them into practice on your farm!