

The Basics of Feeding Heifers Economically



By: Donna M. Amaral-Phillips

When we talk about feeding heifers economically, we need to look at ways to keep feed costs as low as possible, but, at the same time, feed for optimal heifer growth and weight gain. Our growth goals for heifers are for them to calve in at 85 to 90% of their mature weight and 95% of mature structural height at an age of 22 to 24 months of age. For a herd with mature Holsteins averaging 1600 lbs of body weight, heifers should weigh approximately 1350 lbs. after calving at 24 months of age or younger.

How Do We Achieve These Goals Economically?

1. Economical feeding programs start with forages. Forages form the foundation upon which rations are designed and land resources are effectively used. Then, grain mixes are fed to meet the nutrients not supplied by the forages themselves. On a dry matter basis, forages generally cost half to a third of the price of grain mixes.
2. Quality of the forages fed to heifers greatly influences feed costs. As the quality of the forage decreases, heifers eat less of the forage and they need more grain. Thus, lower quality forages increase the costs to feed these heifers. For example, a ration with a higher quality hay may cost 25 cents less a day and heifers grow better. When you start multiplying these cost savings over a group of heifers, they can add up quickly.
3. Balance rations for heifers using current forage analyses. Let's look at an example for a 700 lb Holstein heifer. You are feeding her 4 lbs of grain and average quality hay. You run out of the good hay and switch to another hay lower in quality - more fiber and less of the good stuff for growth. What happens.... the heifer gains less weight each day ... she calves older... or she calves lighter and may not milk as well after she calves. All of these options cost you \$\$\$\$\$. We need to realize that younger heifers are more economical to feed than older heifers. Heifers under a year of age grow by putting down more of what we call lean tissue, muscle and bone. As she gets older she lays down more fat in

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relation to lean tissue, which is more expensive to get a pound of gain. Also, older heifers eat more just to maintain their body weight.

4. Use feed additives to improve weight gain. Bovatec or rumensin can improve weight gain by 0.1 to 0.15 lbs per day and prevent coccidiosis in younger heifers. The growth promotion effect of these additives can get heifers in the milking string a month earlier ... making her more quickly a profit-producing asset versus a profit-eating asset.
5. Sometimes, using commodities such as corn gluten feed or soyhulls may be a cheaper alternative to a corn/soybean meal grain mix. Commodities can and should be used to develop the most economically grain mix that complements the forages being fed.