

# Controllable Feeding Practices

By Donna M. Amaral-Phillips



College of Agriculture,  
Food and Environment  
Cooperative Extension Service

**Feedbunk:** Getting the appropriate amount and composition of feed delivered to the feedbunk, providing adequate bunkspace (24 inches/cow), and having feed available 20+ hours daily are the hallmarks for well managing feeding programs for lactating dairy cows. Have you or one of your employees fed the cows and discovered you did not have enough feed left in the mixer to distribute the feed the entire length of the feedbunk? Thus, feed space just became limiting. Cows should have fresh feed available after returning from milking. Feed should be pushed up often over the day, but 30 minutes after feeding (and return of cows after milking) is a critical time to push up feed. Cows housed in tie-stalls also need their feed pushed up so they can easily reach it. The key is paying attention to all of these details and evaluating whether all employees and/or family help are following the correct feeding practices and, as a manager, making modifications when necessary. Some of the best intended employees can incorporate bad habits or try to cut corners to get chores done faster.

**TMR:** Maintenance and appropriate adjustments for TMR mixers are important in the delivery of properly mixed feed with adequate particle length. In particular, knives may need to be replaced and leading edge sweeps adjusted for proper operation of a vertical mixer. Without this routine maintenance, the TMR may under or over mix the feed which can lead to cow-related, health issues, such as lameness or reduced butterfat.

**Water:** Clean, fresh water should always be available from at least 2 locations per group of cows. Water is the nutrient needed in the largest quantity by all mammals. For every pound of milk a cow produces, she needs to drink 4 to 5 lbs of water. Limiting clean, fresh water intake decreases feed intake and milk production, opposite to our goal. Cows should have a minimum of 3 inches of linear space per cow in the group. Waterers should be cleaned and scrubbed with a brush at least twice weekly using a weak chlorine solution (1 cup of household bleach/ 5 gallons water). Water bowls in tie stall barns also should be cleaned routinely.

**Grouping cows:** Lactating cow groups should ideally be stocked at 100% of resting and bunk space, but no greater than 120%. The fresh cow group should never be stocked over 100% resting space. Housing first-calf heifers separately from mature cows reduces stress on these heifers and improves milk production. Regardless, cows should not be in the holding pen longer than 45 minutes to 1 hour per milking. Thus, a group of cows moved to the holding pen should contain less than 4 to 4.5 times the number of total stalls in the parlor. For example, a double-8 parlor should have no larger than 64 (16 stalls X 4 turns/hour) to 72 cows placed in the holding pen at a time.