

Have “To Do’s” in the Management of Dairy Nutrition

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In today’s world, we often feel like we have more to do than we can ever get done. This is definitely true when it comes to managing a dairy farm business as you try to manage all the different aspects of the operation. To prevent one from becoming overwhelmed, it is important to sort out the tasks that need to be done and complete those with the highest priority first. As it relates to the dairy nutrition program, the following five areas need to receive the highest priorities. These include:

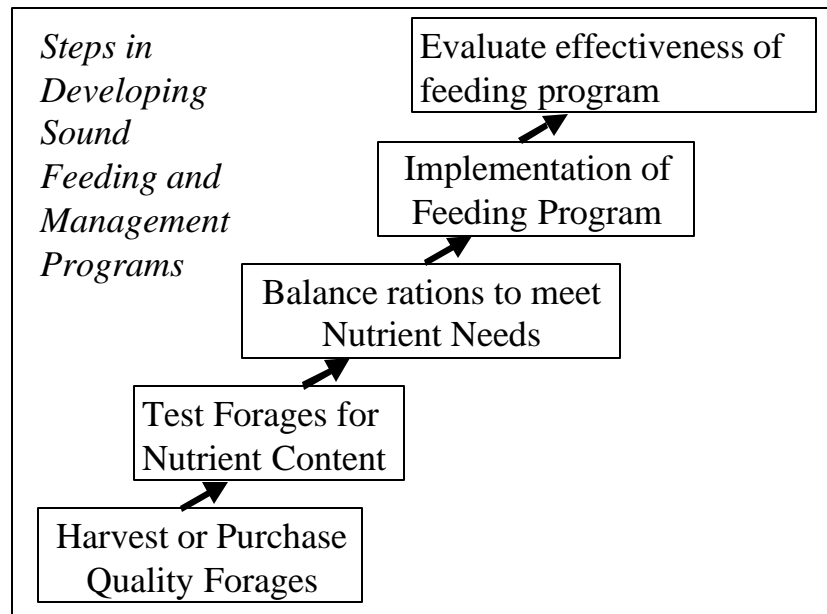
- ☞ Putting together a nutrition package for the milking herd
- ☞ Implementing and evaluating your nutrition package
- ☞ Look to the future with a sound nutritional management program to transition cows back into the milking herd
- ☞ Comfortable cows are content cows
- ☞ Communication, communication pays dividends

By setting your priorities to achieve these goals, one can help improve the net profitability of the dairy operation and the health of the dairy cows.

1 Put Together a Nutrition *Package* for the Milking Herd

Putting together a nutrition program or package starts with harvesting or purchasing high quality forages, testing these forages for their nutrient content, and using these results to balance a ration which meets the nutritional needs of the cows within the milking herd, dry cows and heifers. All of us realize the importance of each of these three components of a nutrition package. Forages need to be purchased or harvested at the *upmost quality and in sufficient quantity* to support profitable performance. Forages need to be tested each year and cutting. Balancing rations also is needed to make sure cows receive the nutrients needed to milk at a profitable level.

Bottom line: The packaging together of these three components (harvesting or purchasing high quality forages in quantities needed, testing for the nutrient content of all forages, and using these results to balance rations) is the critical and often forgotten step. This integration of the forage program with cow’s needs is critical in the effective use of these resources in the production of milk - the saleable commodity. Often times I hear stories from farmers who have failed to integrate these three steps and they are left wondering why profitability is not where they expected.

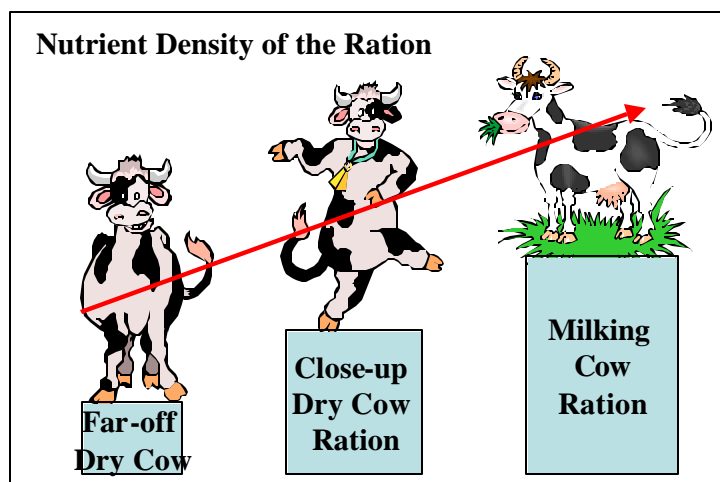


2 Implement and Evaluate Your Nutrition Package

Once the nutrition package has been designed, it must be implemented– or put into place.

We need to make sure the ration is fed as formulated on paper and that cows have access to feed at least 20 hours a day in an environment that is conducive to maximizing intake. We often speak about the three different rations we feed our cows: (1) the ration formulated on paper, (2) ration fed to the cows, and ultimately (3) the ration actually consumed by the cow herself. Cows can and do sort through their feed thus leaving behind certain parts of the ration, especially corn cobs and at times long stem hay. This information needs to be evaluated and the ration adjusted if necessary.

Bottom Line: The ration fed and ultimately consumed by the cows themselves must closely match the ration formulated by the nutritionist. If the formulated ration does not match what you, the farmer, wants to feed or your cows are not eating the formulated ration, *talk to your nutritionist*. There are many rations which can be formulated to meet the cow's needs on paper. The key is that the formulated ration matches your feeding system and that the cows actually eat the formulated ration. Then the final benchmark is to evaluate production using your production records.



3 Look to the Future--Sound Transition Back into the Milking Herd

Milk production during the current lactation is directly impacted by the management and nutrition of cows during the previous dry period but most importantly 3 to 4 weeks before calving. Feeding practices have changed over the years. In the 1970's and 80's, we used to transition or steam cows up after calving but in today's management schemes we recommend transitioning cows 3 weeks before calving. This transition is accomplished by housing these cows separately and feeding them a diet which is formulated to minimize health problems around calving, such as milk fever, and to reintroduce greater amounts of grain to these cows (starting to steam them up before calving).

Bottom Line: Properly implemented close-up dry cow programs have shown to improve milk production by 2000 lbs of milk and may help improve intake, reproductive performance, and animal health after calving.

4 Comfortable Cows Are Content Cows

Cows chew their cuds 8 hours daily for a total of 30,000 chews. Cud chewing is very important to the health and well-being of cattle. When cows re-chew long-fiber particles, they secrete saliva which in turn buffers the contents of a cow's rumen. With this buffering of the rumen contents, fiber-digesting bacteria can do their job—digest the fibrous or forage-related components of a cow's diet.

Bottom Line: Cows need a comfortable place to rest and ruminate. Free-stalls need to be well-bedded, provide a cushioned surface, and large enough for cows to rest and designed so they can rise easily without injury. Control of mud and the environmental temperature, i.e. heat stress, is important to provide an environment conducive to profitable milk production and promote healthy cows.

5 Communication, Communication Pays Dividends

Establishing true communication lines between you, your consultants, and your employees are critical to making a nutrition program work. Communication needs to flow to and from all parties which are involved in the feeding program. Often the greatest misunderstandings could have been avoided or quickly corrected if communication lines have been established and all parties truly communicate with one another. To accomplish these objectives, both sides need to listen to each others' needs and concerns raised.

Bottom Line: To make this relationship work, farmers need to make sure they truly communicate with their consultants. They need to provide their consultants with information about the cows and various relevant aspects of the operation. Nutritional consultants need to know information regarding the milking herd and the quantity of forages that are available to be fed to provide the best balanced ration for the farmer to feed his/her cows for the most profitability. Consultants do not always expect their clients to incorporate all their suggestions, but ask that they listen to their comments and evaluate the options presented. Once these options are presented, farmers need to communicate what suggestions they have and have not incorporated and the impact these suggestions have had on their operation. This two-way communication helps farmers and consultants provide an environment that fosters ways to accomplish a farmer's goals.