

The Dry Period is the Key to Fresh Cow Management

Tess Clayton and Donna M. Amaral-Phillips
University of Kentucky

Today's dairy farming practices have put tremendous demands on early lactation cows. This stressful period can have a negative effect on a cow's health, feed intake, and milk production. Management factors can help alleviate some of the stress at this time, however, it takes a strong program to make a successful and profitable transition from a dry to lactating cow.

Management of the fresh cow actually begins during the dry period. The length of the dry period can drastically effect milk production in the subsequent lactation. The current recommendation on optimum actual dry period length is forty to seventy days. In addition, it is important to feed dry cows a balanced ration (including vitamins and minerals) and they should not lose body condition during this time. Losing body condition during the dry period can lead to metabolic disorders, such as fatty liver and ketosis, which can reduce milk production in the next lactation.

Even more important to a fresh cow is her close-up dry cow period, two to three weeks before she calves. A close-up dry cow should be fed a separate, more nutrient dense ration since dry matter intake could drop as much as twenty to forty percent prior to calving. This period also serves as an adjustment time to higher concentrate diets. These diet changes should be made slowly to help prevent displaced abomasums and/or acidosis. Furthermore, the close-up dry cow period is the time to restrict potassium intake and/or feed anionic salts for the prevention of milk fever which can cause extreme production loss and even death in early lactation cows.

After calving, cows should be encouraged to consume as much dry matter as possible. This does not mean, however, to feed concentrates free choice, as this may lead to acidosis and/or displaced abomasum. When grain is fed separately from forages (without a TMR) the best strategy appears to be a ration which is based on high quality forages with a gradual increase in concentrates. It may be advisable to keep fresh cows separate from the rest of the herd for several days. This should minimize metabolic disorders, while maximizing dry matter intake and thus milk production.

In summary, managing the fresh cow actually begins long before she calves. The dry cow period must be of adequate length and should not be a time when cows are left to fend for themselves. Balanced rations should be fed in both the close-up and the far-off dry cow program to help minimize metabolic disorders. Dry matter intake should be stimulated two weeks before calving and during the first month after calving to maximize milk production in these highly stressed cows.