

## **Check to See If Your Cow's Feeding Program Is On Target?**

by Donna M. Amaral-Phillips

Finally, fall temperatures have arrived in Kentucky. With these cooler temperatures, cows are no longer under heat stress they experienced this past summer and production especially of fresh cows and the ability to get cows rebred will start to improve. Improving cow comfort, proper management of the feedbunk, and feeding a balanced diet are three important areas to help get your cows to milk profitability this fall and winter feeding seasons.

### **1. Improve Cow Comfort–**

**Why is this important?** Getting cows to milk well starts by providing them a comfortable place to lie down and rechew their feed. Cows spend about 8 hours a day chewing their cuds or about 30,000 chews daily. When cows chew their cuds, they secrete saliva which buffers the contents of the cow's rumen. This in turn makes the rumen bacteria better at digesting the forages and grains provided in a cow's diet. The rumen bacteria or bugs make products the cow then uses to make milk.

#### **Management Practices to Check:**

Is adequate bedding provided in freestalls for a comfortable, dry surface for cows to lie down on?

Are the freestalls in good repair to prevent injury and encourage cows to use them?

Do the freestalls provide adequate lunge space so that cows can lie down and get up easily?

When cows exit the lot, minimize the amount of mud and the depth of the change in height from the concrete lot to the path off the concrete

### **2. Manage the feedbunk –**

**Why is this important?** The more feed early lactation cows eat, the more milk they can produce, the sooner they may rebred, and the more profitable these cows are to their owners.

#### **Management Practices To Check:**

Access to clean cool water at all times - Cows only spend about 20 minutes a day drinking water.

Thus, flow rate of water to the waterer is important to provide adequate volumes of water for cows to drink especially upon exit from the milking parlor.

Waterers should be emptied and scrubbed with a weak chlorine solution weekly to improve water quality and consumption.

Cows should be kept close to feed at least 20 hours per day. The other 4 hours is spent in the holding area waiting to be milked.

Provide 24 to 30 inches of bunk space for cows to eat. Be sure to re-evaluate the amount of bunk space especially when larger numbers of heifers and cows are freshening.

The feedbunk surface should be smooth. Pitted concrete troughs should be lined to provide a smooth eating surface.

Feedbunks should be cleaned out daily.

Feed troughs ideally should be at or slightly above ground level. This position results in less feed waste and cows secrete more saliva versus cows fed in raised feedbunks.

### **3. Are Your Cows Eating A Balanced Diet?**

**Why is this important?** Cows and heifers need adequate amounts of protein, energy, minerals and vitamins in their diets to support themselves, production of milk, reproduction, and growth. When deficiencies of any of these nutrients occur, performance is decreased. Thus, cows will not milk as well and heifers may not grow to their potential.

#### **Management Practices To Check:**

Balance rations using the forages you are currently feeding. Too often, I see farmers using rations balanced with forages they no longer are feeding or different forages whose nutrient content are not reflected in the balanced ration. In all of these cases, milk production and health in these herds is compromised.

Take representative samples of forages being fed, test these for their nutrient content, and then use these results to balance rations. All lots of hay need to be tested to make sure that milk production and/or body condition does not suffer.

Make sure that your cows are actually eating the amounts of feed listed on the balanced ration. Check your scales monthly to make sure they are working properly.

Work with your nutritionist to get a profitable ration which is least-cost. Remember that the cheapest ration is not always the most profitable one to feed.

Review feed ingredients and feed additives to make sure they fit your situation and that they are increasing your bottom line.