

Helping Your Cows Cope with Summer Heat Stresses

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As the temperature and humidity rise outside, cows become stressed. Dairy cows are the most comfortable when the temperature outside is between 40 and 70 degrees. As a direct result of heat stress, cows eat less feed and as feed intake decreases, milk production also decreases. The key to managing cows during the summer is to get them to eat as much as possible. To accomplish this feat, management practices for the nutrition program need to be modified slightly.

1. Cows need to be fed early in the day so that the heat of digestion does not peak at the hottest part of the day. This heat load is maximum 4 hours after feeding. Cows produce a tremendous amount of heat when digesting their feed.
2. Cows will consume approximately 70% of their feed after midnight and early morning when the temperature of the day decreases. Thus, feed more at night to make sure feed will be available when cows want to eat. Cows also need to be fed more times a day so that the feed does not heat in the feed bunk. Feed bunks need to be cleaned daily to encourage intake.
3. Make sure that shaded, fresh water is always readily available. Water intake increases dramatically as the temperature outside increases. For example, a Holstein producing 80 lbs of milk will drink approximately 26 gallons of water when the temperature is 40 degrees. When the temperature increases to 90 degrees, water intake can increase to 45 gallons.
4. Dairy cows need shade during the heat of the day. If cows are housed on pasture, it is important that these cows do not congregate under a few shade trees and create a mud hole. These conditions can greatly increase the incidence of mastitis.
5. Fans and sprinkler systems can decrease the heat stress on cows. These systems placed over the feed bunk can help encourage cows to eat more feed. Placing fans in the freestall area will encourage cows to lie down and ruminate.

The key to getting cows to milk well during the heat of the summer is to manage the feeding system to encourage cows to eat more feed. Cows need to be fed more often during the cooler part of the day. At the same time, providing shade and ventilation with plenty of cool water can help cows better handle the stresses associated with the heat.