Dairy Pipeline

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Who or What Determines Your Feeding Program?

How is your feeding program developed? Is it determined by you, or by your feedman, the silo man, your veterinarian, your machinery dealer, your loan officer, or perhaps by your cropping program, the weather, or by what other dairymen are doing? All these people plus weather, feed and price situations help determine how well your herd will be fed and how well your cattle will perform.

This business of feeding cows deserves a lot of attention. You should have a well-planned program. It can be designed by you, if you know what you are doing, or by someone else who understands dairy nutrition and is able to discuss feeding programs with you. That is easier said than done, but it is something worth striving for.

Be a stickler on details. For example, make sure the cows are actually consuming the feed they are supposed to be eating - correct pounds, the right kind and quality of feed, and fed at the right times and in the right manner. If the cows are not consuming what is recommended, have the program recalculated.

In other words, give the program a chance to work, and don't let "outside interests" mess it up. A good feeding program needs a good boss - one boss - not a lot of different bosses pulling in a number of different directions. That boss can be you, or it can be someone off the farm in whom you have confidence and can trust.

There are many different ways of feeding cows properly, but the important thing to remember is that some concepts can't be mixed. That's why a feeding practice that works for one fellow may not work for another person who is feeding under slightly different circumstances.

With a well designed feeding program, a knowledgeable person can decide if other concepts and feeds being used by other farmers or being promoted by the news media or by salesmen, will "fit" your program. To have a workable feeding program, all the pieces have to fit.

A well-planned feeding program has many benefits: it helps you feed the herd properly; it also helps you plan cropping programs, harvesting schedules, how to store and handle feeds, and it helps you to plan your feed purchases.

One Loss is Enough

Just last week, I observed a good example of good planning in action. The dairyman was interested in putting up good quality haylage for his milking herd. He had a sealed storage unit. As you know, the weather does not always cooperate at harvest time; such was the case with him. He wanted to salvage some rained-on alfalfa, but he did not want to put poor quality feed in the sealed unit on top of his good quality haylage.

He already took one beating from the rain damage. He was not about to self-inflict a second beating upon himself by putting inferior feed into the silo. If he did this, he would be forced to put this poorer quality feed through his milking cows. The production he would have lost by doing this would have been far more costly than the rain damage already experienced, or even a complete loss of that particular cutting!

Instead, he decided to press the rain-damaged crop into a horizontal plastic tube. (Another option would have been to bale it.) Now he has the opportunity to manage his feed supply and utilize it to its fullest potential. He can handle this poorer quality forage separately and feed it to heifers and dry cows. An important word of caution at this point: be certain that any forages you are putting up, particularly those damaged crops you are trying to salvage, have sufficient nutritive value to be fed; even heifers and dry cows - your future producers - deserve something better than junk feed!

This is unlike another dairymen I visited earlier this summer whose first cutting of alfalfa got old and stemmy and "went down." To add insult to injury, it also got rained on. The day I was there, he was putting it into a sealed unit. "The cows would eat it better if it was chopped and if it went through a fermentation" he reasoned. True, but how much milk will they produce on it and how will it affect herd profits?

I have yet to see any fermentation process increase the nutrient content of any feed! Palatability - yes. Digestibility can be either increased, or decreased with ensiling, depending on circumstances; so can palatability. If you really wanted to improve palatability of this poor stuff, let it get a little on the dry side so that it heats up and carmalizes during the ensiling process; you'll drive the nutritive value down even further, but cows will still love it!

Control Your Feed Situation

It is important to provide yourself with opportunities for being able to manage your feed supply - to have access to the right kind of feeds for the right cows at the right time, so you can utilize all of your feeds to their fullest potential. This can pay big dividends in these times of rising costs and softening milk prices. This usually requires sufficient storage facilities for separating feeds by kind and quality. This is easier to do in a hay mow, where you can stack hay accordingly. However, for silage, you'll need several silos, stacks, bags, etc. And, that can become costly. The cost and inconvenience of this has to be weighed against the added benefits, which can become a big guessing game. Nevertheless, it's a concept worth exploring.

A good feeding program can be a guide to help you plan your feed purchases. As a dairyman, part of your profits are determined by how good a buyer you are. You can follow the example of a young dairyman I visited last year, who had to purchase most of his feed. He determined how much and what kind of hay he needed and was successful in purchasing a barn full of hay in advance of the winter feeding program and in advance of his need - at that season of the year when it was early enough for him to be able to be choosy, and when prices were still reasonable. As a result, he had a sizeable quantity of fairly uniform hay, which he could test and around which he could formulate a balanced ration. In other words, he was in control of his feeding program and the performance of his herd, at a time when many other dairymen were in desperation and at the mercy of current markets - and market situations can be mighty unmerciful at times!

"This is fine, but I can't afford to borrow money to make advanced

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