

Watch that dry cow feeding ration

UNIVERSITY PARK — Many dairy farmers carefully control rations for milking animals, but neglect to do the same for dry cows and springing heifers. Rations for dry cows, particularly during the last 2 to 3 weeks prior to freshening, greatly influence health and production at calving and during the critical early lactation period. Cows with disorders at freshening or in early lactation are more apt to become problem breeders and may produce less milk, depending on the types of problems encountered. To help prevent disorders at

freshening, it is especially important to avoid excessive amounts of protein, calcium, and energy during the dry and pre-freshening period. This means that only 6 to 7 lbs. of the daily forage dry matter per head should be alfalfa or mixed legume forage. If pasture containing a lot of clover or other legumes cannot be avoided, dry cows need to be fed levels of other forages to limit legume intake. Whole plant corn silage should not provide over 50 to 60 percent of the forage dry matter. Also, it often is better to keep dry cows on dry cow forage

than to convert them prior to freshening to a milk cow forage ration that is too high in protein, calcium or corn silage.

Excessive intake on protein may make cows more susceptible to ketosis, off-feed problems, twisted stomachs, udder congestion. Too much calcium in the total ration can lead to retained placenta and milk fever. Insufficient calcium intake throughout the dry period also may lead to disorders at calving.

An abnormally high ration of energy in late lactation and throughout the dry period can

produce obese cows. This makes them more susceptible to difficult calvings, metabolic disorders, and infections. It is important, however, to feed a moderate amount of concentrate at least during the last 3 to 4 weeks prior to expected freshening, to establish a microflora and rumen lining that is adapted to a combination of forage and concentrate in the diet. Rumen pH will be appreciably lower and mineral uptake improved when 3 to 5 lb. of concentrate are fed per head daily. Exceptionally high-producing cows that are good eaters may have their concentrate

increased to 6 to 8 lbs. during the last week prior to expected freshening. This amount of concentrate also will provide an opportunity to balance the forage ration for pre-freshening animals. It is important that trace elements, such as selenium, and vitamins A, D and E are provided, as well as protein and major minerals, including salt.

Low selenium status can occur within three weeks after supplemental selenium is removed from the ration. Vitamin A and E levels also may be depressed if cows and heifers are not on supplementation, pasture or green-chop during late gestation. Since a lack of these important nutrients can reduce disease resistance, special care must be taken to feed dry cows sufficient amounts of them. Although the concentrate requirement for dry cows is relatively low compared to that of milking cows, their needs for some nutrients are close to those of milk cows. Thus, the concentrate for non-milking animals may require higher levels of supplementation than for milk cows, to ensure adequate vitamins A and E, as well as the appropriate selenium status, injectable preparations may be used at drying off or at least 3 to 4 weeks prior to expected calving. Five ml of MuSe can be administered to provide selenium and vitamin E, and one to two million units of vitamin A can be given in an injectable ADE preparation. Vitamin A injectables are of greater importance when feeding primarily hay or corn silage and should not be needed when the animals have been on good pasture recently.

Manure for dry cows and heifers should be frequently observed. Constipation or feces that are too hard indicate that the diet is low in protein and minerals or that water intake is too low. Making certain that dry cows are fed adequate amounts of forage will also reduce constipation.

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