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8-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Cassel, E. Kim, "Top 10 Recommendations to Consider When Feed Quality/Quantity/Costs are Compromised" (1996). *Extension Extra*. Paper 106.

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Extension Extra

ExEx 4005
Revised
August 1996
Beef & Dairy

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY / U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Top 10 Recommendations to Consider When Feed Quality / Quantity / Costs Are Compromised

by E. Kim Cassel, Extension dairy specialist

1 Maximize corn silage harvest.

If weather conditions lead to immature corn, remember this can have feed value similar to normal corn silage. This feedstuff can be an important source of fiber and energy in ruminant rations in a year when hay quality/quantity are limited and/or corn prices are rising. Corn silage is also an excellent compliment when using non-protein nitrogen to reduce purchased protein costs.

2 Consider using non-protein nitrogen (NPN) to off-set costs of supplemental protein.

Urea or anhydrous ammonia are two popular sources of non-protein nitrogen. You can use them to boost the protein content of silage, hays, and/or rations.

An adequate supply of energy is essential when feeding NPN. That's why a good corn silage harvest is essential for the incorporation of urea or anhydrous ammonia in the diet. Otherwise, it is necessary to feed adequate grain to insure proper utilization of NPN.

If yields and dry matter content vary field to field, accurate incorporation of NPN into silage can be difficult but not impossible. If this is the case, it may be better to actually supplement the NPN as part of a grain mix or TMR. (See Extension Extra 4006, Using Non-Protein Nitrogen to Control Feed Costs.)

3 Allocate feeds based on nutrient requirements of animals.

If possible, inventory quality and quantity of feeds available and allocate according to production, growth, and maintenance requirements. In other words, allocate the better quality feeds to animals with the greatest nutrient demands, i.e. lactating animals and young stock.

Watch feeding moldy hays and silages to young stock and late-gestation heifers and dry cows. These animals are more susceptible to the negative effects of moldy feeds than are lactating cows. However, feed refusal is often a good indication of the quality of feed offered, assuming feeds are not force-fed via a total-mixed ration (TMR).

4 Consider commercial feeds as an economical alternative to commodity or generic feeds.

When the grain markets react to weather-related price increases, commercial feeds may be more cost effective than purchasing individual ingredients. Purchase of large contracts enable feed companies to maintain costs in the face of rising prices. Thus, even for the dairy producer heavily involved in commodity feeding, commercial feeds may provide an economical alternative to rising grain and protein supplement costs.

5 Consider alternative sources of added fat.

Floods, drought, and compromised feed quantities and quality have caused many to question the value of cottonseed and soybeans as economical sources of added fat for dairy cattle.

Possible alternatives to cottonseed and beans are sunflowers and animal fat. Sunflowers follow in the family of oilseed fat, while animal fat has a few different considerations for feeding.

Probably the biggest drawback of animal fat feeding is the need to warm the products during cool/cold weather. This is a minor consideration but yet another step in the feeding process.

For more information on added-fat feeding and sunflower feeding for dairy cattle, contact the Dairy Extension Office at SDSU (688-5488). Factsheets are available to answer questions related to these topics.

6 Feed grain strategically.

Traditionally, when corn and/or soybean meal prices have increased dramatically, strategic grain feeding surfaces as a way to make purchased feed last longer.

This strategy has worked for many and involves allocating grain based on production needs, i.e. giving to those who need and holding back from those who don't. In other words, the early-lactation cows are full fed grain while the mid- to late-lactation cows are fed little or no grain.

Provided body composition is not compromised on the late lactation cows as they dry-off and through the dry period, this feeding strategy can work. However, short-term gains in feed costs may cause long-term losses if, in the next lactation, cows calve with inadequate body condition, etc.

7 Consider culling.

If there was one lesson to be learned from the Diversion Program of the early 1980's, it is that culling can and will increase production. Although their production was supposed to be decreased by the program, some people found culling actually increased production 5-30 percent.

When feed supplies are tight, culling the low-producing cows may have a two-fold benefit:

- Spare feed for cows, with greater income over feed cost.
- Reduced bulk tank somatic cell counts, if these same low producers have somatic cell counts greater than 200,000.

8 Weigh feed.

Know what you are feeding. It sounds simple, but scales enhance ration formulation/feeding accuracy and avoid feed and feed-dollar waste.

9 Test forage for quality.

It's always important to forage test to know the quality of feeds being fed. However, in a year of variable weather and harvests, testing can do two things:

- Reduce feed costs.
- Allocate feeds to appropriate groups of livestock.

10 Keep DHIA records.

Don't guess! Test! If not DHIA, use some record program so you know which cows are making you money and which cows are potential cull candidates.



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650 copies printed by CES at a cost of 7 cents each. Revised August 1996.