

Straight to the Bottom Line – 3/1/11

By: Steve Martin

Looking closer at dry cow and heifer diets

We are indeed in interesting times as it relates to dairy economics. Nutritionists are working feverishly to be sure we are feeding the milk cows as close to perfect as possible to gain all that we can from high milk prices. At the same time, we must be respectful of very high feed costs. One area we need to be sure and not forget is the rations for heifers and dry cows. When considering these non-lactating diets, we need to be sure to avoid the two possible extremes. First, don't ignore potential reformulation because the diets are working well and are not as important as focusing on milk cow diets. Nor should we panic over cost increases and cut them to the bone from a nutrient standpoint. Heifer values are sure to increase with the higher milk prices so heifer feed cost is a good investment. As well, saving too much money on dry cow diets is a "save now and pay more later" proposition.

On most dairies, these diets are based primarily on lesser expensive byproducts like corn gluten or soyhulls as well as lots of forage. Hopefully these forages are home grown which helps reduce input costs. One trick I like to use in these diets is to see if I can replace a moderate protein/energy byproduct like gluten with a blend of a higher concentrated protein/energy source and a less expensive roughage. These roughages could be home grown sorghum or wheat silages or purchased cotton burrs or cottonseed hulls. Straw and corn/sorghum stalks also work well. If your dairy doesn't not currently employ a hay grinder, I would suggest you consider purchasing one. Many of the lower quality forages like stalks can be utilized much better if they are ground prior to feeding. As an example, consider the use of moderately priced cottonseed meal and chopped straw as an equal nutrient replacement for corn gluten feed. Another angle to consider is off quality alfalfa hay. Off quality meaning not so much moldy hay as over mature hay that has fiber values a bit too high for most lactating diets. These hays will still have protein approaching 20% and can work well into these diets.

One last area to investigate for potential savings is a bit more complicated and requires better management. Remember that these animals have requirements for amounts of nutrients not percentages of nutrients. With all of the price relationships changing, it may be time to look again at limit fed heifer and dry cow diets. These diets contain a higher percentage of protein and energy, along with the other nutrients, and can be fed at a lower intake level. This approach has been tested extensively and can be very successful. The most common limiting factor though is the need to have exact pen counts and provide adequate-plus bunk space. As well, for heifers especially, relatively close information on body weight is needed to accurately formulate these diets to be sure all needs are met.

One more comment on far off dry cows; now is a great time to be 100% sure you are not overfeeding this group. This is pretty easy to do, especially in the cool weather. We all know how much fat dry cows cost us after freshening. So, spending extra feed cost to make them fat now and then paying again through poor fresh cow health is too big a mistake to make. Watch body condition and intakes and adjust diet nutrient concentrations to match the needs.

So, look for ways to possibly use more inexpensive roughages by using more concentrated protein/energy sources. Maybe there are places you can reduce costs and still maintain animal performance. If you are intrigued with the limit fed heifer approach, run some scenarios and evaluate the cost savings. And always remember, garbage in equals garbage out. Keep the diets sound and the payback will come.