

Don't Neglect the Dry Cows and Heifers

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Ruminants and more specifically cattle, are truly amazing creatures. Their ability to take relatively non-nutritious feedstuffs and convert them into highly nutritious and palatable milk and meat products is quite a conversion. In dairy cattle nutrition we tend to spend most of our time making sure of a few things.

- 1) **She transitions well.** It is very important to the success of the dairy that when she freshens she has a healthy calf and she has minimal negative events to interrupt her ability to produce milk.
- 2) **She peaks high.** We need to insure that we do everything we can to maximize her genetic potential to produce milk early in lactation.
- 3) **She breeds back on time.** The single biggest factor effecting long term dairy sustainability (in my opinion), is reproduction. – More on this later

These factors are inarguably very important and should garner a tremendous amount of time and effort to execute at a very high level. There is also a balance that must be kept on the economic side of the equation. A dollar spent or saved in the very important places on the dairy has the exact same value as a dollar spent or saved on the less glamorous parts of the operation.

There is no doubt that the dry cows and heifers offer the dairy a place to feed lower value feedstuffs. Honestly, we can feed these groups many, many different ways and successfully reach our goals. However, we sometimes confuse value and quality. The entire rumen microbiology function allows us to get away with feeding some pretty rough feeds at times. But even the rumen can reach its limits and be unable to negate the effects too much “bad” feed. Clean, low quality feed is perfect for saving money and keeping heifers and dry cows from getting fat. Moldy, low quality feed is bad for milk cows and bad for heifers. High nitrate feeds or feeds known to contain mycotoxins are very often associated with reduced reproductive performance. We work very hard to keep these ingredients out of the lactating rations, because they are often associated with reduced milk production as well. So they end up in the “heifer or dry cow feed” category.

The take home message is – don't overdo it. Feeding low or bad quality feeds to dry cows and heifers is generally the best alternative vs. feeding those things to lactating cows. But remember that there needs to be some limits in place. If not, breeding isn't going to go well or abortions are going to increase or early milk is going to suffer. Sometimes it will cost much less to just throw it away. Feeding a few tons of nasty, moldy, bad feed might make you feel like you saved a few hundred dollars on feed you didn't throw away – but it might have cost you delayed pregnancies or aborted calves you don't even know about. Either way it cost you money. Oftentimes the best economical decision is to **throw it away**, because the cost of feeding it can be very high and those dollars are subtracted Straight From Your Bottom Line.