



by Steve Martin

Why make a fuss over ration reports?

AS YOU might expect, I spend a lot of time building rations. There are many other tasks in consulting than just formulating diets, but they are central to everything we do.

In a recent discussion with another consultant and a dairy producer, I mentioned that formulating diets is a near sacred task to nutritionists. It embodies nearly everything we know about cows and the ingredients we blend together to feed them. The other nutritionist nodded his head in agreement, but the producer looked at me kind of funny.

Sacred or not, I want to do a good job with a formulation and I want the report to communicate the most important details to the dairy. I also want the report to look good and professional, so I spend a little extra time on this last step. It's important.

I have found, though, that each client is different in the type of report he or she wants – and tailoring it to their desires has been helpful. A ration summary can contain much more detail than most producers want. Ration formulation software products have a plethora of report options to meet almost every possible need. Even so, I often find myself bouncing a text file output into a word processor to edit the report to meet my goals.

No matter how detailed and scientific software is to help build a good ration, many report options really look more like a dot-matrix report from 1989. But I can fix that, while at the same time taking a few extra minutes to add or highlight particular details to communicate what I think my client wants to see. I can also emphasize points that I want them to see.

I suppose the main goals of a ration report might make a pretty short list. Limiting them to a one-page report is always desirable, if not required.

Main goals of a report

The key goal is to communicate how many pounds of what diet we are going to feed to which cows. But will this information be communicated in as-fed pounds or in dry matter pounds? We almost always deal in 100 percent dry matter pounds and then let the dairy handle the normal variation of dry matter percentage with wet ingredients. This is prob-

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ably best, but if someone decides to include both dry matter and as-fed information, the nutritionist has a pretty important task of tracking and regularly updating the actual real-time moisture information.

The second goal of the report is to communicate some level of information about nutrient content of the diet. This is where the one-page rule gets tricky. I can print out a list of nutrients that is two pages long with no problem, which is not the goal. I have customized, and thus limited, the number of nutrients to a more manageable list, but will still often customize it based upon the particular dairy or ration.

For instance, I will likely include information about important minerals that are in a close-up cow diet that I will omit from a milk cow ration. And if we are having particular conversations about, for instance, managing potassium or adding chloride to the close-up diet, I will often make those values bold and add an asterisk to attract eyes to the information. Other, more routine, values such as energy, protein and fiber are on the top rows of every report.

One of the challenges in identifying nutrients on a ration report is the requirement to keep up with ever-changing nutrient analyses.

Be wary of static values

With expected changes in forage nutrient content, as well as in some byproduct ingredients, a static nutrient value on a page must be questioned. The main nutrients like fiber, protein and energy will likely be kept in pretty good check, but if nutrients are printed on a report that have not been verified and changed over time, reporting their values is not wise. My goal is to not include nutrients on the page that I can't defend.

The third goal to mention relates to economics. Or perhaps this should be first on the list. I suspect that for many producers, once they learn where "cost per head" is on the page that is where their eyes go first. The problem with that, though, is of all the numbers on the page it is maybe the most time-sensitive and difficult to keep correct.

Let's say, for example, that a producer gets a new ration report and it shows a feed cost of \$5.00 per head. It should not be assumed that the actual cost of the ration is \$5.00. Too many moving parts are required to generate that value. Are the cows ac-



tually eating the formulated amount? Probably not. A modest 5 percent difference in actual intake would swing that feed cost by 25 cents!

The other problem with reporting a feed cost value on a fixed report is the need to know what cost per ton

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and dry matter percentage were used for each ingredient.

Keeping those up to date in a printed report is a challenge. My way around that is to report an estimated feed cost, which offers a reminder that the static value on the page will never be exactly correct. Another way to approach this is to report the cost in terms of cents per pound of dry matter.

I delete one report item

Many of the standard reports in ration software programs routinely print how much milk is supported by the diet, but I always remove it from my reports. I wrote about this in a recent column, but I will mention again that there are far too many variables in milk support for me to ever include this estimate on a routine ration report.

Having said all of that about numbers, dollars and nutrients, my favorite part of ration reports is the notes I add. I also wonder if it is the most important part. Including commentary on the ration in a few bullet

points is gold. Not only does it point the producer to the main objectives of the process, but it also serves as a great resource when referring back to previous rations.

I once had a client thank me for including notes in my reports. In a meeting with his partners he was asked to justify a few ration changes that were made in recent months. By looking up previous reports on his computer and reading the notes, he had a play-by-play account of why each change was made and what economics resulted from them. The notes connected the old ration to the new one and offered an overall justification for the current diet.

With the advent of some very sophisticated on-farm feeding software, the number of ration-related reports is nearly endless. Our group has also developed a more dynamic software program to add flexibility and scenario building to our static ration reports that are sent in a pdf format. They can also include more "real" cost information based upon actual data. Adding ingredient usage projections, inventory management and contracts make ration reports a powerful economic tool for a dairy.

Next time you examine a ration report, look a little deeper at the details. Are forage analyses and ingredient prices up to date? Is the diet formulated to reflect a fairly accurate value for current intakes? Are there any notes that help guide you through the process of understanding the goals and perhaps shortcomings of the overall formulation?

Taking time to fully utilize a ration report will help ensure that you, your employees and your nutritionist are feeding for the bottom line. **WEST**