

Dry Cow Management on Pasture

By Dr. John Popp

The dry period of the dairy cow is a critical determinant of the productivity and profitability of the dairy enterprise. As these cows don't contribute to the finances of the farm - at the time of standing 'dry' - they can easily be forgotten. Attentive dry cow management is absolutely key to ensuring a strong lactation.

Dramatic metabolic and physiological changes are occurring during the dry period in preparation for the next lactation. Many herd problems can be traced back to the nutrition and management of the animals during the dry period. Examples of health issues that are related to poor dry cow management include low peak milk, sluggish intake post-calving, metabolic disorders, reproductive problems, body condition loss and mastitis. Proper management of dry cows can have a dramatic effect on the health and productivity of the dairy herd. In addition, research has indicated that properly managed dry cow programs will result in an additional 2000 lbs. of milk/cow/year. (Dr. Ken Nordlund - University of Wisconsin-Madison).

Pasturing Dry Cows

Pasture has long been used for dry cows, both as a form of exercise as well as a low cost forage source. It is an excellent time to preserve investment dollars as well as using the time the cows are out on pasture to clean out the dry cow pens used during the winter months. High quality pasture can fulfill the nutrient requirements of far-off dry cows (at least 4-8 weeks prior to calving), but pasture alone typically does not provide sufficient energy for the close-up cows (within 3 weeks of calving).

While good dry cow management can be achieved on pasture it can also create some roadblocks. It is imperative that both quality and quantity of the forage is good. As a rule, if pasture is 8 to 12" in height, the top 1/3 to 1/2 of plant material will adequately meet the nutrient requirements of dry cows. As the pasture is grazed down, stem material increases substantially and cows do not receive adequate nutrition. Moreover, if pasture is overly mature or overgrown the quality will be relatively low. At that time, either supplementation is warranted or the cows should be moved to a fresh grazing paddock.

Electric fencing and rotational grazing are good tools for controlling the quality and quantity of the forage. Taking periodic clippings of summer pasture for analysis can help determine quality. Be sure to try to sample what the cattle are grazing. Including portions of the plant that the animals are not actually consuming will give an inaccurate picture of their daily nutrient intake. If forage on pasture is high in potassium and consumed the last three weeks prior to calving, milk fever is inevitable. Cattle should not be put on high potassium pastures three weeks prior to calving. If this cannot be achieved the high potassium pasture forage should be diluted by feeding low potassium feeds and supplements.

The ideal situation would be to have your close-up cows near the yard with some supplemental feed where they can be easily monitored. Not only can the calving process be observed, but transition feed management and dry matter intake can be easily managed.

In conclusion, a well managed pasture has an important place in dairying. Producers should be aware that proper dry cow management is much more than just turning the dry cows out to pasture. Diligently monitoring their nutrient and dry matter intake is an important step in preventing unwanted, costly health issues that could arise during their upcoming lactation.

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