

Feed Bunk Management

By John Popp, Ph.D.

How bunks and feed inventories are managed can have a great deal of impact on feed intake and therefore production. While I won't cover every detail regarding bunk management, I would like to focus on some of the most common issues I often observe. When I worked in the feedlot industry, I met some great managers that took a great deal of pride in how they made their feed 'calls' daily and were able to show significant improvements in animal performance. Similarly, a solid program of feeding equates to more milk on the dairy farm and good bunk management is an important part of it.

Bunk Cleanliness and Feed Turnover

Very few producers would care to admit problems in this area. "Our cows eat up, if they don't – we make them". That is a major mistake as feed withdrawal is actually what is really going on. Yes, the cows will eventually clean up. However, during this time feed intake slows affecting milk production negatively. If the period of 'empty' bunk or 'minimal feed' is extended, the cows will start to develop subclinical ketosis. The bulk of feed management information suggests that cows should be fed for 5 or 10% refusal unless bunk management and rumen function are at a high level allowing for a lower % weighback. While this addresses the issue of feed turnover, we need to combine it with observation of feed sorting and bunk hygiene. In my years of feeding cattle we would observe bunk spots that cattle would simply choose to avoid. In 9 cases out of 10 we would find moldy feeds or an area of the bunk that was not properly cleaned days prior and refused feeds would begin to build up in these areas. A routine look would say they have enough feed left, a more detailed inspection would reveal that perhaps that area of the bunk contains feed that the cows do not like – it smells or it is moldy. By nature, cows will avoid this feed; if forced to consume it, most times they will 'oblige' us. The repercussions of this can be negative. In summary, be sure that feed turnover is tracked; try to feed for a 5 to 10% refusal to start with and observe the bunk as a whole and identify areas where feed is building. That small 50 lb spot of smelly silage that accidentally ended up in the bucket can easily affect 4 to 5 times as much feed around it to be refused when it sits in the bunk.

Sorting Behavior

I addressed sorting in the above section briefly when observing feed refusal and potential causes. The other area, probably deserving of a book chapter, is sorting behavior. The cows drill through the feed; they shake the forage and throw it up over their back...all in an effort to get to the grain; a good indication that things are not going the way we want them to. By nature, animals will seek higher energy feeds such as corn or barley grain as they require less feed



intake to meet energy demands. If they over-eat on these high starch feeds they can end up with subclinical or sometimes even clinical acidosis. Sorting can be an indicator of poor rumen function, under or over-processed feed, and/or poor feed suspension. Poor feed suspension can be improved upon by the addition of water. As a rule, a diet should contain 50% moisture; if feeds are overly dry they are more subject to being sorted. Proper rumen function needs to be addressed with feed formulation, whereas under and over-processing is subject to managing equipment. In summary, sorting behavior can be corrected with good management and proper nutrition. Ensuring equipment works properly and actually delivers a ration mix that is in sync with the ration formulation and is suspended properly are the three key areas. If sorting is excessive, it will result in subclinical or even clinical cases of acidosis and ketosis.

Management of Feedstuffs

Further aspects of overseeing the bunk relate to how the feeds are managed going 'in' and coming 'out'. This means the process of coming in from the field all the way to ending up in front of the cows. All too often in my years of working I have heard farmers say, "Can we just get this pile used up because it is not very good" or "We put it up a 'touch' on the wet side...or a 'touch' on the dry side". My first thought on the subject of a 'touch' on the wet side is butyric acid. If the feed is in fact high in butyric acid, it is best to simply NOT feed it. Attempting to do so can result in reduced feed intake and can also trigger subclinical ketosis. Also molds and



understanding of feed resources. Know the dry matter content of feed components used and the dry matter intake of the cows. Test to ensure that what is being formulated on the feed sheet from the nutritionist is what is actually being provided to the cows. There is an old saying: “You can’t manage what you don’t know”. Do the cows have adequate bunk space? Are the cows experiencing heat stress resulting in reduced feed intake? Are the feeds heating in the bunk? Is fiber or grain passing through in manure? Are cows experiencing other forms of stress? Having the answer to these questions will result in better feed management.

Crystal Creek Tools

I have attempted to discuss some of the major issues that I see on many different farms. Crystal Creek has developed a multitude of tools to help with some of the issues relating to bunk and feed management. On feeds being preserved, we recommend looking at inoculation of silages. Not only will it increase the quantity of dry matter preserved, but also help to improve forage quality. Crystal Creek Inoc-U-Lock™ can be used to support good feed quality. If you suspect subclinical ketosis, timely treatment is critical to prevent losing cow productivity. Triggers to subclinical ketosis can be feeds containing mycotoxins, butyric acid in silage, prolonged periods of empty bunk and poor bunk management. The use of Crystal Creek Opti-Peak™ can help improve liver functions. When mycotoxins are suspected it is advisable to use a toxin binder. Crystal Creek offers Fuse 207™ as a binder for toxins and also Crystal Creek’s Mycotex™ that will effectively address vomitoxin. If your cattle are experiencing additional stressors, please give us a call at Crystal Creek to discuss ways we may be able to help.

mycotoxins can ‘rear’ their ugly heads, both in the case of too wet or too dry. Improper packing of the silage pile and improper seal of the cover can also be issues. I have fed a lot of feed on my farm over the years; it is a costly resource and we make every effort to do a good job to get it put up right. More than once, I have seen guys head to the field to roll up that last batch of hay just to get it done, knowing all too well, it is too wet and it will mold. Why spend the money?

Good feed management further manifests itself in a good

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