

DRY COWS AND PRE CALVERS

Here we take a look at that tricky subject - dry cows.

Managing dry cows starts in the last 2-3 months of lactation. Cows should go dry at a condition score of 2.5-3.5 as fat cows eat less than thin cows. This may mean a more careful look at feeding in late lactation.

The "Far Off" dry cow (from drying off to 4 weeks before calving)

Maintain body condition at 2.5-3.5. Keep the cow full but do not overfeed. Medium quality forage will suffice. It is common to put on condition at grass, particularly in the spring.

Straw bales in a bare paddock are a popular system, but these cows will probably be underfed. High straw allowances need rumen degradable protein or intakes will be compromised. Do not forget minerals.

The "Close To" dry cow (last 3-4 weeks of pregnancy)

These are the queens of the herd! Do not treat them like commoners!

Intakes are the key to success - the more they eat before calving, the more they eat (and more quickly) afterwards. Around 2-3 weeks pre calving, feed intakes begin to drop. During the last week before a cow calves, feed intakes drop 25-30%. This depressed intake predisposes a cow to many of the metabolic problems that occur soon after calving. Always feed the best feeds - No warm or mouldy, foul smelling silage. Nothing unpalatable - only the best for the queens of the herd.

Aim for intakes of dry matter at 2% of bodyweight. That is 13kgs dry matter for a 650kg cow. Forage alone is unlikely to hit this target and feeding concentrates prepares the rumen environment for efficient use of production rations. Concentrate inclusion at around 3kg is a sensible guideline. High yielding American Holsteins regularly consume 5kgs or more pre calving.

The concentrate should have a protein level of 20%, with high levels undegradable. This will balance most forages to make the total ration 13-15% crude protein. It should contain high levels of selenium and Vitamin E. The correct levels of magnesium and chlorides to assist against milk fever are essential.

Including yeast in the total ration is highly recommended, as maximum intakes are the objective.

Remember to include pregnant heifers in this group.

Milk fever

If an epidemic of milk fever starts, the most important first action should be to change the forage source if possible, or at least dilute it with something different. Grass silage, particularly 1st cut is the main culprit, usually due to high levels of potassium. Grazed grass can also be a problem - even if it seems there is low growth. Deny access to a small area in the field and be amazed how much grass grows when not constantly grazed!

Maize silage and whole crop are low in potassium, as are some 2nd and 3rd cut grass silages. (Straw is also low in potassium, but more about that later). As grass silage is reduced, take care to balance protein levels as low levels reduce dry matter intakes.

Magnesium Chloride in all available water supplies should be tried next. Stabbing a bag at each end and dropping in the trough allows a slow release.

The straw debate

The recent publicity regarding feeding high levels of straw (4-5kgs) to Close To Calving cows should be treated with caution. In most cases, these levels give rapid weight loss and low intakes.

Where this has worked reasonably well is when the Far Off cows have been on a high straw diet. If you try this system, make sure the straw is chopped to less than 5cm and feed 2-4kg of palatable straw. Ensure there is a well-balanced and mineralised TMR of good forages and concentrates to go with the straw.

Remember: Low dry matter intakes before calving have caused ketosis, DA's, mastitis, retained placentas, metritis and poor subsequent fertility problems.

I feel happier with a maximum 0.5kg of chopped straw included with ad lib forage and concentrates aiming for 13kg dry matter intake. But I am not selling mixer wagons with straw chopping knives.

Myths and misconceptions

Feeding well in the last 4 weeks gets cows too fat!

Not true. Over fatness comes from over feeding in late lactation or the Far Off dry period.

Feeding well in the last 4 weeks gives bigger calves!



Not true. Outsize calves come from overfeeding in the 7- 8th month of pregnancy. The sire has the most influence on calf size.

In summary - health, fertility and productivity are decided in the 3 weeks either side of calving. Correct management of the dry cow has a major impact on your bottom line.