

OUT OF DATE COW WEIGHTS

Going back about 4 years I produced an article (British Dairying, October 2003) criticising the data entered into ration programmes by advisors and feed reps. One of the things I had a dig at was using cow weights of 600kg for a Friesian/Holstein, when a more realistic weight was 650kg. This extra 50kg is worth about 5 megajoules of energy and therefore we were in danger of undersupplying energy.

We all know the modern cow does not fit very well into old cubicles that were purposely built for a much smaller animal, but how big are cows nowadays? I weigh band about 400 black and white cows per year and would confirm we are nearer 700kg than 600kg. In fact, a Guernsey herd that I am involved with has an average weight of 575kg. Conversely, first lactation heifers are usually much smaller and lighter than estimated.

I requested confirmation from The Dairy Herd Health & Productivity Service (DHHPS). They have cow weights entered on the input form when a metabolic profile takes place. After removing Channel Island herds and obvious bad guesses, the average weight from April 2002 to December 2007 was 665kg from a database of over 39,000 cows. My average from the same source was 680kg.

Is this 15-30kg significant? For rationing purposes, probably not. Management of the feeding is far more important than ration programmes. But remember, within averages there are extremes. From a Holstein herd in the South West I recently weighed a selection of cows that averaged a massive 820kg. The ration plan was for a 650kg cow. We were 17 megajoules of energy short for maintenance alone, which equates to about 1.5kgs concentrates.

What I am saying is that there is a need to use an approximate weight for the herd in question, not an average that covers all. This also has implications for dosage rates. Investing in a weigh scale would pay dividends.

From my experience, cows are heavier and first lactation heifers lighter than most people think they are.

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