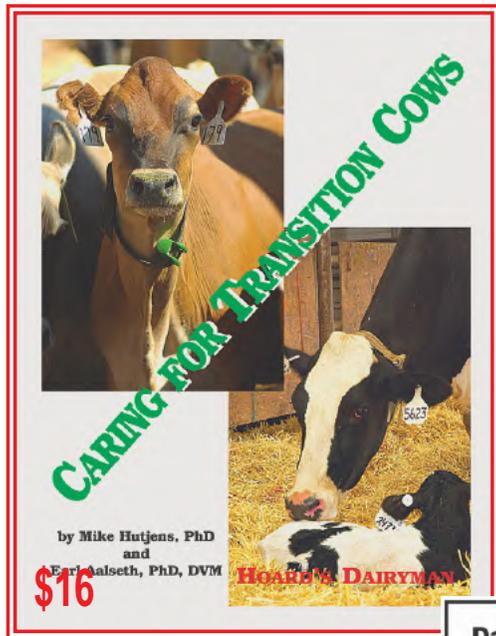
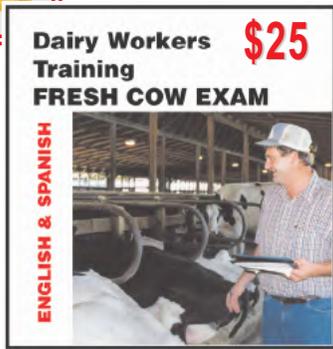


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Cutting feed cost begins at home

HAVE you done your homework and signed good commodity contracts but still feel like you're spending a fortune on feed? Are you shopping around for the best buys but still are spending too much on feed? Has your nutritionist made all the possible changes to reduce costs without jeopardizing milk and components, but feed costs still seem out of control?

For many of you, the answer is "yes" to all of these questions. However, how much time have you spent lately focusing on feed-cost control right at your dairy? When was the last time you checked the mixer scales? How often do you monitor your feeder's accuracy? Do you have scales at your farm to weigh every single load of bean meal or wet brewers, or any other commodity? When was the last time you had a training session or refresher for your feeders to help them better understand how important their role is to cow performance and your dairy's profit?

Shrink eats money . . .

I see people focusing too much on how to cut feed costs without realizing how much money they are wasting once the feed, protein mix, or commodity shows up at the farm. Just think about this. Current feed costs per cow can run \$5 to \$6 a day. For a 1,000-cow herd, this would represent about \$165,000 per month expenses for the milking herd alone. Poor feed storage, poor feed management, and lack of feeding consistency can create a 10 to 15 percent shrink loss that would represent more than \$20,000 per month. These are dollars spent that will not generate any revenue!

This is why every time I am asked, "How can I reduce feed costs?," my answer is by better monitoring and controlling feed losses.

Track deliveries . . .

First, you need to have a consistent routine when receiving feed and feed ingredients. Often, I see feed trucks delivering feed without anyone from the farm on site to control the delivery. Receiving includes not only the actual slip or invoice and where the feed should be put but also the weigh verification, inspection, and sampling. This will ensure both quality and safety of what's received and also will give you more accurate information for inventory control and will help you control shrink losses.

Collect samples of every load of grain, commodity, mineral pack, or

other feed received, and store them for a reasonable period. It can be one month or more, depending on the ingredient.

Also, investing in a scale to weigh all ingredients or feed received at the farm can be a valuable long-term investment. It will allow you to verify correct receiving weights and immediately address load discrepancies with your supplier. Again, it will give you more accurate information that will help you adjust inventory records and control shrink losses.

Several factors have an impact in shrink losses, depending on the way feed and commodities are handled. Typically, this is related to wind losses, presence of rodents and birds, and weather (especially when using open commodity sheds) or when allowing by-products, like wet brewers or distillers, to be exposed to rain and sun.

Much has been discussed about the advantages of storing ingredients in upright bins compared to open-sided commodity sheds. Flat storage systems usually are preferred for high-inclusion-rate ingredients that may not flow well in upright bins. Examples of these are whole cottonseed, hay, or beet pulp. Also, protein mixes that contain high levels of liquid fat or molasses usually work best in these flat commodity bays.

Consider bins . . .

However, any other ingredient or feed should be kept in upright bins. Shrink loss using this storage typically will be limited to 1 to 2 percent compared to 5 to 10 percent with open-sided commodity bays. Small differences in shrink loss between storage systems may save a lot of money, especially with expensive ingredients or concentrates.

With current feed prices, it is not unusual to see savings of about \$36,000 per year by using upright bins instead of commodity bays to store a high-priced, low-inclusion protein mix (\$750 per ton). At the same time, loading the mixer with ingredients stored in upright bins will improve the weighing and mixing accuracy compared to using a loader bucket with commodity sheds.

As I tell farm employees during training sessions, consistency is the key to success and profitability for any dairy operation. Reducing variability during mixing and feeding will not only improve production and herd health but also will help control feed costs.

Here are some suggestions that will improve mixing uniformity and consistency:

- Use preblends of concentrates, mineral and vitamin packs, and

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any other small-inclusion-rate ingredients used in the rations. Remember that an extra shake of the bucket or an extra shake of a bagged feed additive will add to the cost of every load of feed prepared.

- Develop a mixing protocol, including mixing time and loading sequence of ingredients. Periodically, monitor your feeders to make sure that they stick to that protocol.

- Test forage dry matter at least once per week, and make the necessary adjustments according to forage moisture variations.

- Invest in feeding management software. This will help you better monitor feeding accuracy and consistency and will give you the opportunity of working closer with your employees. It also can be a great tool to develop incentive programs and give better feedback to your feeders. You also can use the

Poor feed storage, poor feed management, and lack of feeding consistency can create a 10 to 15 percent shrink loss that would represent more than \$20,000 per month.

software as a tool when doing employee performance appraisals.

- From time to time, check mixer scales for accuracy as well as mixing uniformity by sampling and screening the TMR with a particle separator box.

- Periodically observe and monitor manure consistency. Better yet, develop a manure scoring protocol, and train your employees to do it themselves.

Feed costs can be better controlled by feeding cows more accurately. Periodically adjusting feeding charts according to cow number variations in the different groups will improve feeding accuracy. Therefore, making the necessary adjustments for cow numbers will reduce feed waste due to greater feed refusals.

Watch refusals . . .

Typically, I see owners running 4 to 5 percent refusals when feeding milking groups. With current high feed prices, managing feed bunks for 2 to 3 percent refusals could have a significant impact in feed costs.

Dairies with good feeding and feed bunk management certainly can achieve this. Needless to say, this would take closer and more frequent attention and excellent communication between all people involved in feeding. Again, a feeding management software system will help a lot.

Let's put this into perspective. If your current feed refusals are 5 percent and your feed cost is \$5.50 per cow a day, then your feed losses (or at best, feed that will be of lower value, if fed to heifers or low-producing cows) will be almost \$100,000 per year. In contrast, when running a more lean bunk management, by keeping feed refusals at 2 to 3 percent,

feed losses or what is then fed to other cattle would represent less than \$40,000.

Having 2 to 3 percent refusals will be achievable in very well-managed dairies. It takes consistent feeding and feed bunk management, feeders that are well trained and understand the importance of monitoring the feed bunk, and forages and by-products that are relatively consistent.

It always is recommended to discuss this with your nutritionist before adopting this type of approach to feeding cows. Another, more conservative, approach is to reduce the levels of feed refusals to 2 to 3 percent only in the medium to low-producing groups, and maintain fresh and high-producing groups at 4 percent. This still could result in significant feed savings throughout the year.

Also, what do you do with your feed refusals? Depending on the time of the year and what the feed refusals look like (throw it away if all you see is corn cobs), you can at least feed the refusals to heifers or low-group cows. On some dairies, these refusals sometimes are fed to far-off dry cows, as well. Practicing this can have some significant savings during these times of high feed costs.

Feeding practices that will have an impact in shrink losses and feeding accuracy will go a long way in reducing your feed costs. So remember:

- Do an assessment on how ingredients are being handled from the time they arrive at the farm. Is there room for improvement? Do you have standard operating procedures in place for receiving feeds and commodities? Could this be improved?

- Store expensive protein sources and concentrates in upright bins. If you currently are storing these in a commodity shed, calculate current losses, and decide whether it could be profitable to invest in a few upright bins. My guess is that, if your current losses are 4 percent or more, investing in a few bins will be worth it.

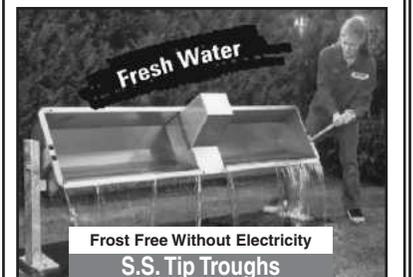
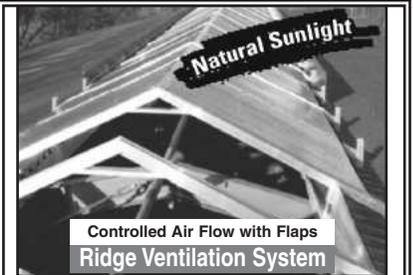
- Develop a mixing and feeding protocol to minimize the within batch and between batch variations in mixes.

- Spend time and money coaching, training, and giving feedback to your feeders. Using outside consultants or nutritionists who can speak the native language of your employees will be ideal.

- Use feeding management software to monitor and adjust your feeding. This technology will help reduce batch variations, reduce feed losses, and give you a more accurate feed inventory.

- Closely monitor the feed bunk and cut down on feed refusals to better control feed losses.

Now, more than ever, it is important to focus on improving and monitoring areas of your feeding program. They will have an impact in reducing feed losses and improving your farm profit. 



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