

There's far more to good nutrition than the ration



With 22 years' experience, independent nutritionist Hefin Richards knows what works and tells **Rachael Porter** producers underestimate the value of good cow comfort



Factors outside the dairy ration – such as cow housing, feed passages and lameness – are often the limiting factor when it comes to nutrition, says Hefin Richards of Profeed Nutrition Consultancy.

“Dairy nutrition is about much more than just ration formulation and there's rarely one big challenge facing dairy producers – just the usual ongoing challenges,” explains Mr Richards, who has more than 22 years' experience and looks after 12,000 dairy cows, in herds ranging from 130 to 800 head.

“There's always something and it's very much a case of evolution, not revolution, as far as nutrition is concerned.”

Producers have to meet the requirements of the herd within ever-changing constraints, including the economy, environment and climate. These vary each year, season, month and even day to day in some cases.

“They are different each year, but tend to fall into the same categories,” Mr Richards says. “It could be milk price, it may be feed price, it could be the weather and forage production.”

The cows have also changed during the past 22 years. “There's been huge genetic progress, but that's not always been well thought out. Not all producers have bred cows that best suit their management system and that, too, presents challenges. It's fair to say that, in some instances, the cows and the nutritional and environment management haven't kept apace.”

He says that it's not the formulation of dairy rations that's the limiting factor on many units, it's what happens between the mixer wagon and the cow that's often the issue.

“The ration itself is often well-balanced, but

bottlenecks occur when something prevents the cow from eating enough of it. That could be insufficient space at the feed fence or poorly positioned neck rails that make feeding uncomfortable for the cow.

“Perhaps cubicles are inadequate and the cow doesn't spend enough time lying down and chewing the cud to get the most from the ration. Or perhaps she's so lame that she struggles to get to the feed face in the first place.”

The good news is that there are often simple steps that can be taken outside the ration itself that can lead to better herd nutrition and more efficient milk production. Cow comfort, housing and feeding facilities all play a role, but Mr Richards accepts that investment in these areas on many dairy units has been limited during the past few years due to the low milk price.

“There's always something challenging producers, and it's very much a case of evolution, not revolution, as far as nutrition is concerned”

“That said, there are things that can be done that cost little or nothing. Removing or raising a head rail at the feed fence, for example, can make all the difference. Watch your cows and see if you can identify any sticking points that can be simply remedied.”

He says that dry and transition cow management underpins each lactation and the focus should be on measuring, managing and minimising metabolic disorders such as milk fever and ketosis. This is an area where significant progress has been made, but many farms still allow these kinds of issues to become the norm.

Calf and youngstock management are other massive areas of opportunity – 90% of units have scope to reduce age at first calving, and improve the production potential of their heifers through better nutrition and management. This starts as soon as the heifer calf is born and continues through the rearing, mating and pregnancy stages.

COW COMFORT

Many producers are still overlooking cow comfort and underestimating just how much factors such as feed passage width and lameness can impact on productivity. These things can make or break the success of a ration.

“Monitor lying time and make sure cows have unhindered access to feed,” Mr Richards advises. “Ensure the ration is consistent too, as too much variation can cause problems.”

Forage management and feed presentation presents a huge opportunity for improvement on many units, he believes. The impact of poor forage on production and health is clear to be seen, but the impact of wastage and hidden dry matter losses on profit is often overlooked.

For producers who are looking to invest in improving cow housing and facilities, he offers some food for thought. “Decisions on buildings and passageways are often based on ‘how many can we squeeze in’, but the impact of that decision on production can be significant.

“So make sure you think about feed passage space, air quality, lounging space and cow comfort in general. A more ‘cow-friendly’ comfort-focused shed can easily result in an extra litre of milk per cow per day. That's more than a million extra litres of milk at 30ppl, for a 120-cow herd, for the 25-year lifespan of that building. So you're looking at an additional £330,000 for doing nothing more than making the cows more comfortable and making it easier for them to eat and lie down.”



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