

Useful Pointers for Cows during Turnout

These days our cows are high performance animals that need guiding through potentially very stressful times of the year, of which turnout is a major one.

Turnout

This should take place over 10-14 days in good weather to avoid re-housing if conditions are poor early in the season. Re-housing cows during bad weather means further big changes in diet in addition to the initial. This situation can seriously affect yield, milk fat and fertility efficiency around breeding. Keeping cows in overnight for around 3 weeks after the start of grazing minimizes the stresses of change and gives better nutritional control.

Nutrition & Fertility

Many herds see a drop in fertility after turnout. High milk urea nitrogen is common at this time but this does not affect fertility efficiency alone. Problems are mostly due to energy requirements not being met, particularly in those cows most recently calved. The reason for this is not necessarily due to a low energy content of grazed grass, but more because the cows struggle to eat, and fully utilize, enough to meet their needs. Cows with a yield of 32 litres would need to eat 19 kg dry matter of good spring grass, however under good grazing conditions, grass intakes peak at around 15-17kg DM/day (Sinclair Mayne, Reading University). Furthermore, if these cows are competing with mid and late lactation cows for a grazing strip then they may do well to eat enough to meet the energy needs of 18–20 litres. The additional litres are not easy to come by either. In the parlour, in spring, cows will often eat 2-3 kg maximum of a dairy grain at each milking, supplying 10-15 litres. Therefore, cows yielding over 35 liters will be in energy deficit.

In a practical situation, dairy producers would be best advised to house cows for a certain part of each day. This enables them to consume more conserved forage, which would be greater than that of grazed grass during the same period. In this time, concentrates could be mixed with the forage to increase the energy intake further still. Bringing the cows in 2 hours before afternoon milking is a good time to do this. Cows will eat more grazed grass in the evening when sugars are at their highest and will tend to lie down and reduce heat build up in the afternoon sun. This is another good reason to get cows in earlier in the afternoon as it also reduces the chance of heat stress.

Regular body condition and rumen scoring of cows, or better still, blood profiles will help ascertain the true value of grazing.

Feeding at Grass

There are many points to consider when feeding at grass, including; paddock or strip grazing, distance to pasture, group feeding and buffer feed (TMR), or not. What I want to cover here is substitution rate. Typically, 1 kg dry matter of a concentrate feed will replace 0.5 kg dry matter of forage, up to a point (substitution rate). The reason this isn't 1 for 1 is due to increased rumen outflow when a concentrate is fed, enabling the cow to eat more.

During 91 feed trials conducted in Ireland with cows at grass it was discovered that cows would, on average, eat more grazed grass when fed a bypass soybean meal. The reason for this is still unclear, however compared to feeding a starch-based feed grass dry matter intake was over 2 kg more.

Minerals

Grazed grass is very variable in its mineral supply. Just as we analyze haylage in the bunk during the winter months, we should also analyze pasture to see what we are giving the cows with regard to minerals, protein and energy. Even when fed 5kg of a dairy grain, a 32 liter cow can still be provided with less than half of her requirement of copper, selenium, cobalt and iodine.

Bloat

Where pastures include clover mixes, the incidence of frothy bloat is likely. The most practical preventative approach to this is to ensure all grazing cows eat some conserved long fibre forage each day. This could be achieved with bringing cows back into the barn two hours before afternoon milking.

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