

Do you know how much your cows eat?

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FeedWatch Factsheet

When we talk about feed intake, we are really referring to “Dry Matter Intake,” meaning the amount of feed consumed after subtracting out the moisture. Calculating feed intake is not difficult if you feed a TMR as the sole feed source. You need to know how many cows are in the group, how much TMR is put out, how much is cleaned up, and the dry matter percent. Subtract the amount cleaned up from the amount offered, divide by the number of cows, and multiply by the dry matter percent, and you have dry matter intake per cow.

The consumption per cow will vary widely with stage of lactation and milk production levels.

Your nutritionist can do a much better job formulating your rations if he truly knows how much your cows are eating. Cows need a certain amount of various nutrients to support their production. The concentration of those nutrients in the ration can vary significantly as consumption changes. Suppose your nutritionist has formulated a supplement to provide essential amino acids, bypass fat, vitamins, and minerals. All of these nutrients are expensive.

Your nutritionist has determined your cows need 5 pounds per day of this supplement which may cost \$500 per ton or \$1.25 per cow per day. Because you have no real knowledge of how much dry matter your cows are eating, he or she uses an estimate of 50 pounds, so you add the 5 pounds of supplement to 45 pounds of other ingredients and feed that mix.

If your cows are actually eating 55 pounds of dry matter, you are actually feeding 5.5 pounds of supplement, adding 12.5 cents per day of expense. For 100 cows, that is obviously \$12.50 per day or \$375 a month of needless expense. Actually, if your nutritionist knew your cows were eating 55 pounds of dry matter, he or she could have formulated for you to feed

less than 5 pounds of supplement due to the greater amount of nutrients coming from other sources.

Suppose your cows drop in production. Did some forage get wetter so that dry matter consumption dropped and milk production with it? Or did some forage get drier so that the percent forage in the ration rose and, thus, grain consumption went down? You will not know this information unless you are measuring these things, and it is difficult to correct the situation without proper information

Determining feed efficiency

Early lactation cows tend to have lower intakes compared to production because they are getting some energy from fat reserves. Cows averaging 90 pounds of milk might be eating only 45 pounds of dry matter, thus, having an efficiency of 2:1. While this is fine in the short-term, if it continues, these cows will lose excessive condition. By 60 days in milk, dry matter intake should rise well above 50 pounds and may reach 60 if peak milk production goes much over 100 pounds. Efficiency at this time is often in the 1.8 range. In later lactation, as production begins to drop, and cows begin to regain lost body condition, we can expect efficiency to drop to perhaps 1.5. This would be true of cows milking 75 pounds and consuming 50 pounds of dry feed.

High-producing cows are always more efficient than lower-producing ones because the maintenance needs are the same. So, when more milk is produced, the maintenance requirements are diluted over more pounds of milk and efficiency improves.

Tracking dry matter intake will become rather easy once you get in the routine of doing it. If you do not have a moisture tester, one can be purchased from various farm supply vendors. Get one this week, and then begin tracking feed intake for all of your groups. It will help you manage your herd for more profit.

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