

Feed Bunk Scoring for Dairy Cows

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Underfeeding dairy cows is a serious error in dairy management. Any steps that we do to restrict dry matter intake costs milk production. One way to address limit feeding is to adopt a system of scoring your feed bunk. In a free stall operation you need to check all areas where feed is offered. In a tie stall barn all bunk areas in front of cows must also be checked. Daily feed bunk assessment by the feeder or manager is a good idea to adopt.

A good time to check feed bunks is one hour before the next feeding. This holds if the herd is fed once or more often per day. The most typical scoring system used is as follows:

- 0 – no feed**
- 1 – scattered feed left (< 5 % of amount fed)**
- 2 – thin layer remaining (5 - 10% of amount fed)**
- 3 – a layer of 2-3 inches (approx. 25% of amount fed)**
- 4 – 3 or more inches remaining (> 50% of amount fed)**
- 5 – feed untouched**

A score of 0 or 1 is indicative of underfeeding the herd. This is a problem that must be addressed to achieve maximum feed intake. Cows that are being forced to clean up the feed bunk are being underfed. Anytime the cows are cleaning up the last 5%, there are some, if not all cows that are not eating to their maximum intake. Often there is some forage material that is less palatable, spoiled, or otherwise of poorer quality. Cows usually sort these parts of the forage out, and under ample feed availability, will leave it behind. When forced to consume this feed, we generally sense that the cows are hungry. This feed is usually of lower digestibility and will itself reduce the cow's feed intake. Feeding should be increased by 5 % or more until a score 2 is observed. If daily feeding has to be adjusted by more than 5%, forage dry matters and the feeding program should be checked.

A score of 2 is ideal as long as the cows are to be fed within half to one hour.

A score of 3 indicates overfeeding. Feed bunks should be cleaned out and the feed offered should be reduced by 5 %. Again, forage dry matters and feeding programs should be checked to determine the reason for the excess feed remaining. Stale or moldy feed being offered, or incorrect feed mixes are often the cause.

Scores of 4 or 5 represent serious feeding problems. Each of these needs attention.

We know that weather conditions and other extremes from day to day normal operations can affect dry matter intakes and lead to day to day fluctuations. Therefore use common sense when checking the feed bunk on a single observation. Other management aspects such as failing to have the feeder note cow movement from group to group can cause abrupt changes in feed bunk scores.

Daily feed bunk scoring can help the feeder or herd manager spot problems in forage dry matter, forage quality, or ration problems. It is a critical step to good feeding management to assess the feed bunk often.