



January Milk Drop

Many herds have experienced a considerable drop in milk production over January this year.

The basic cause is a drop in dry matter intake (feed). This January has been quite different from last January (2005) in regard to weather and hence feed available in the paddock.

I have reviewed a dozen rations which were being fed during January last year and compared them to this year's. There are two areas that have produced a considerable drop in dry matter intake, in fact in many herds 4 to 5 kgs of dry matter. The first is in pasture. All rations reviewed from last year had an average of 2 kgs DM pasture in the ration. This 2 kgs DM pasture is simply not there this year. Many rations in February last year had 3+ kgs DM pasture after heavy rains at the end of January.

The second missing ration component is summer fodder crop. All herd's rations reviewed from last year had on average 5 kgs DM crop (turnip/rape), again, this year those same herds only have 1 or 2 kgs DM crop due to poor rainfall.

Most often this missing 4 kgs DM feed is not replaced, or attempted to be replaced, resulting in substantial milk drops. Milk drops are only one side of the coin, perhaps the more damaging is loss of BCS, particularly as we draw closer to dry off time. A dry off BCS of 1 score below optimum (42kgs live weight) not only limits next lactation, but predisposes our cows to metabolic problems at calving.

Milk decline beyond mid-lactation is extremely difficult to reverse if it has gone on for more than a few days. However, doing all we can to correct the nutritional deficiency for the sake of dry off BCS, avoiding calving problems and productivity of next lactation is essential and sound investment even if we cannot salvage milk production of several weeks ago.

Any attempt to replace these 4 kgs dry matter will be beneficial. Possibly the best of practical options would be 2 kgs of vetch hay and an additional 2 kgs of grain feed in the dairy, however still no match for pasture and crop. Next best from the possible list is 2 kgs more silage and 2 kgs of grain. Silage's higher fibre restricts intake in this option, however it is probably the most practical.

Finally, the principle of feeding “meals” cannot be overlooked. Imagine coming in from morning milking and finding both your breakfast and lunch on the table. You eat the breakfast, perhaps pick at lunch then walk away. By lunchtime you are hungry again but lunch is now dried out from the heat, covered in flies and anything but appetising.

Cows are only going to eat about 4 kgs DM silage in a “meal”. However if they are served another “**fresh meal**” of silage around 12 noon, be sure they are ready to consume it with gusto! The more we can observe our cows and understand their preferences, the greater will be our reward in improved productivity and profit. Too often we force cows to fit our concept of their needs. Having said this I quickly add the qualification that the cows and farm are there to serve us, not the reverse, but with some creative thinking on how we operate our farms we can most often satisfy both objectives.