



Management or Milk Price

When applying the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities & Threats) business analysis grid to your farm business, obviously we would place milk price in the Threats column. But what about management? Is it a Strength, Weakness, Opportunity or Threat? It could be any depending on who the judge is or how we 'see things'.

It should be a Strength and a source and incubator of Opportunity. The fear is when we become so possessed by milk price you can be assured management will be neither a Strength nor an Opportunity. How we view a problem often is the problem – our attitude can colour or cloud what we are looking at.

As indicated last month I want to commit this article to transition management (dry cow/springer cow/fresh cow) due to its major impact on production and profit. It places 'management' powerfully in the Strengths and Opportunities column of our SWOT farm business analysis.

Drying off cows in a good BCS 5 is well understood to provide additional energy to the cow post calving when intake cannot match energy requirement for production, and reproduction. Most cows by virtue of low protein rations this summer will meet this criteria easily. A reminder to maintain mineral nutrition through the last 100 days or suffer mineral related disease in early lactation is timely in times of lower milk price. Like energy, intake is always below requirement in early lactation and affects production, health and reproduction. Good managers do not make short term savings at the expense post-calving collapses.

I'm hopeful next year we will have new guidelines on 'far-off' 'dry cow management as recent research has indicated. Our traditional rule – no weight gain/no weight loss during the dry period still stands. Weight movement either way will precipitate calving problems, especially ketosis. There is only one way to ensure weight stability, and that's to add up energy in feeds at that time to allow 90 MJME/day for Holsteins and 65+ for Jerseys.

We need 12 kgs DM at 9MJME/kg to achieve this. Adequate intake of lower energy dense feeds is very unlikely to happen, so if energy is deficient, weight loss will occur. Crude protein needs to be 13%. This year's silage would be perfect as it is generally testing at about 9 for ME and 12+% for CP. This year's home grown hay will be very deficient in both energy and protein and would need fortifying with grain and protein meal (barley + canola meal/lupins)

If an early break brings pasture on we are in danger of weight gain from excess energy. In contrast to hay above, we would need to dilute pasture energy/protein density by force feeding hay: and I stress 'force feeding' as palatability will not enhance intake. Strip grazing pasture to ensure adequate hay intake will achieve this.

Length of dry period has been a subject of discussion here and much research overseas. Trial work conducted at Washington State University focused mostly on udder health and length of dry period found little variation in udder health with variations of 30, 45 and 60 days dry. To their amazement, there was dramatic difference between the 30 and 45 day dry groups and the 60 day dry group in milk production over the following 300 days. The 60 day dry group produced 11% more milk than the two shorter dry groups. On an 8000 litre herd, this is an extra 880 litres!

The springer group need another 20 to 30 MJME of energy (Jersey to Holstein) and 15% CP. The energy is not a problem, but getting 15% crude protein in a springer ration can be a challenge while avoiding excesses of high potassium in pasture or silage. Most silage is well below this CP% this year anyway. A strip of pasture (if available) to allow 3 kgs DM, plus quality oaten hay (palatable to encourage intake) and 3 kgs of a quality lead feed grain mix (30% wheat/30% barley/30% canola/lupins plus minerals and anionic premix to provide a DCAD of -2500msq) will meet energy, but be down on 15% crude protein.

Low protein will cause weight gain or lower intake during the lead feed period, but also straight after calving; both precursors for ketosis. Dystocia (long & difficult calving) is also a probable outcome. Protein content of lead feed determines quality of colostrum and our precious calf's survival and lifetime productivity.

The next major challenge is to provide a palatable fresh cow ration to encourage maximum intake and so avoid DA's. Protein in lead feed impacts on appetite here too. We need a ration of energy density 12 MJME (20+ kg intake @12 MJME = 250 MJME in total). An NDF of 32% to enable 20+ kgs DM intake, but with adequate "effective fibre" for good rumen function (1 kg of long oaten hay) and 18 to 19% crude protein. This one will be difficult without ample pasture.

Another critical issue is mastitis control. Provision of clean dry calving area is essential. Dry Cow Therapy will not help much if cows are calving in muddy, bacteria infested areas that work harmoniously with open teats to infect udders.

Recent USA research has demonstrated a correlation between mastitis in early lactation and infertility. Data over 5,327 cows' 'nonreturn rates' for cows with no mastitis were 35%. Cows with mastitis within 30 days of breeding were 24%, but cows with mastitis within 30 days after breeding were down to 14%.

Several theories exist regarding the affects of mastitis on fertility including fever induced body temperature increase and associated lower feed intake increasing negative energy balance, but the theory of most interest involved the compounds and hormones produced in response to the infection. Two of these we are familiar with, cortisol and prostaglandin; neither being conducive to holding a pregnancy.