

Straight to the Bottom Line

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Title- The Goods and the Bads Milking Cows in the Fall

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Autumn is by far my favorite time of the year. The cool weather, fall colors and the return of football just make fall hard to beat. After twenty-one years formulating dairy rations though, fall can be a frustrating time of the year. In many of these years, milk production has seemed to lag behind what we would think it should be. By the time you are attending your fourth or fifth high school Friday night football game and notice that the hot summer afternoons and evenings have nicely turned into cool fall evenings you expect the cows to notice too. This weather is perfect for football for sure and really good for the cows too. So, then why do fall milk production increases seem to so often lag behind? We know that seasonal changes have numerous impacts on all animals. So, why should we not expect to see our milk cows influenced as well?

One of the sure reasons for the lag in production is the frequent need to build back lost body condition from what seem to be more and more brutal summers. In heat stress the cow changes. Reduced intakes, increased maintenance cost to keep cool and increased standing time are among the results of heat stress. As the temperature drops and the cow becomes more comfortable, her intakes obviously go up. Depending somewhat on her stage of lactation, she is most likely to apply those extra nutrients from higher intakes to rebuilding her body condition first. In nature, many hooved ruminating cousins of the domestic cow have late fall as their breeding season. Perhaps the innate priority to conceive and carry a calf through a cold winter drives the cow's energy partitioning towards body flesh over lactation. In any event, these fat stores will most likely be replenished in advance of significant increases in milk output.

I am sure the daily reduction in daylight hours has a play here as well. We know through good science that hours of light have an impact on a variety of animals in confinement. For cows living out in the elements, these shorter days must have an impact.

This particular fall, it seems like we are seeing a more rapid than usual climb in components on a percentage basis. As we look at increased intakes this fall, maybe we are gaining in body condition along with some modest, but nice increases in milk protein and butterfat. Milk pounds may be lagging, but we are making nice progress on pounds of milk solids sold. In the end, that is really what matters. To take it to another step in trying to access the improving income over feed cost as the temperatures decline, you must look at true feed cost with the increasing intakes and the pounds of butter, protein and other solids sold. It could be that your milk flow in pounds is a little slower in rebound than you expected, but your dollars of income from selling pounds of solids may be increasing more than you think.

We always encourage our clients to look at true feed cost and true income based on solids sold not lbs of milk sold. Trying to figure out how you are progressing through the fall is a great time to remember that. Intake may run a little as body stores are replenished and drive up feed cost. But, perhaps solids on a percentage basis are increasing too. So, you really don't know for sure unless you take the time to actually do the math.

Fall is what fall is. Go ahead and enjoy the football and maybe be a little patient with the cows. They will come and get back to where you think they need to be soon. If they don't the problem may not be with your fall ration, weather and management, but it may be more of a lack of heat stress abatement back in the summer. A frustrating fall might be a nudge to think about improved heat stress management techniques before next summer arrives.