

Straight To Your Bottom Line

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How Much is Too Much?

When considering what feedstuffs to use in rations, we often have preconceived ideas of what we are willing to pay and what is just too much. The trendy term for these ideas or preferences is our “bias”. Generally these preferences are set in our psyche from years of experience that trained us when to use certain by-products or alternative protein or energy sources in the ration. However, we need to be careful not to actually increase cost to the dairy by “forcing” ingredients in or out of the ration because of personal bias.

Obviously, opportunities come along to take advantage of low prices on alternative ingredients. At times these are a good fit and taking these deals can result in true cost savings in the ration. There are other times however when a low cost alternative ingredient may not work because of other ingredients already in the diet. As well, negative attributes that a particular ingredient can bring to the ration may limit its inclusion. At times, the difficulty of physically handling an ingredient or other logistical limitations might negate its opportunity to actually reduce feed cost. Chief among these risks are high shrink and high or variable moisture content. If the deal looks too good to be true, it probably is!

Dairy cows have limitations on numerous dietary characteristics. Among these are various nutrient restrictions on things like starch, fats, proteins, minerals, etc. Byproducts often have unusual levels or unique combinations of some of these important nutrients. If in a particular ration formulation, we are at the upper or lower limit of a particular nutrient, it doesn't matter how little the opportunity ingredient costs. If you push your luck, you might save the feed cost, but an unbalance ration will result. In such a case, the cow will become less productive. Milk production could drop, components might go down and health or reproduction may suffer. To be sure, unbalanced rations have consequences. The flip side of the coin is also true. If we simply can't meet her nutrient requirements due to diluting the diet with too many byproducts, we can limit her ability to produce to her genetic potential.

So, what is the right balance? Can we take advantage of cost-saving ingredients while maximizing daily production of milk protein and butterfat? And is there a chance to jeopardize the health of the herd? The answers are different for every nutritionist, dairyman and situation. The answers are different when milk is \$17/cwt than when it is \$24/cwt. It is also necessary to consider inventories of feed and forage already on the dairy. The list of questions could go on, but the fact is that there are countless variables to consider when determining how much is enough and how much is too much.

Cows are amazing creatures and they have the ability to turn large amounts of low quality feeds into high quality food for human consumption. However, every biological system has limits. Understand the

limits, take advantage of the amazing cow and her abilities, and use both to maximize the return on feed dollars.

Guidelines for making decisions on individual feed ingredient opportunities are: 1) How does the ingredient impact the overall cost of the ration? 2) What impact does it have on the production of sellable product? And, 3) Are there health and or reproduction risks to consider? Knowing what the correct answers are to these questions can save money or make money that goes Straight to Your Bottom Line.