

# The Secret to Feeding Dry Cows

Why is it that some herds always seem to perform better than others, regardless of the feed system used? The answer is simple. One of the biggest contributors to farm performance is the attitude adopted towards feeding the cow. For example, if you believe that 18 kgDM is sufficient for your milkers, or that 8 kgDM is all dry cows need, how can you expect them to perform any better than they already do? Regardless of the diet the cow is on, the more you can get a cow to eat, the greater the performance and the better the profitability. This is because proportionally more feed is used for milk versus maintenance e.g. If a the maintenance requirements of a cow are 8 kgDM, then a cow eating 18 kgDM/day will allocate 56% of feed intake to milk production. If that cow eats 22 kgDM/day, then she will have 64% of the diet available for milk production.

Over the last 10-15 years there have been amazing gains in genetic performance of our cows. But how much has cow management changed in this time? Modern genetics means that the cow will be driven to produce milk at higher levels regardless of feed input. If she is unable to eat enough dry matter after calving, either through insufficient being offered and/or restricted rumen size, she will inevitably lose too much condition too quickly. This can have disastrous effects on reproduction and the subsequent lactation. You cannot expect a cow that has been fed minimal intakes during the dry period to double or triple her intake the day she calves.

Getting a cow to eat more is not as simple as it sounds. The cow has to be trained how to eat that much. In order to do this it is likely that a change in attitude is required by you about how a cow is managed during the dry period. The rumen is a muscular organ and, like most muscles, requires regular "exercise" to maintain strength. The rumen also has stretch receptors, that have a direct effect on appetite. If the stretch receptors can be maintained at maximum during the dry period then the cow will be able to eat more post calving.

The dry cow requires a certain level of nutrients for maintenance, warmth, calf growth, uterus & placenta growth and possibly some condition gain. Good quality pasture (in sufficient quantities) will usually meet most of these nutrient demands. However pasture is not a good source of fibre.

Ideally, to maintain rumen capacity and muscular strength, addition of physically effective long fibre like hay, straw or late cut silage is required. A minimum of 2 kgDM/day, but preferably 4+ kgDM/day up to 50% of the diet should be fed as straw or hay. Silage can be added to either side of the equation depending on chop length and quality.

Aim to feed Jersey type cows a total of 10 kgDM/day and Friesians 12-15 kgDM/day. If pasture supply is short, and supplements such as PKE & maize silage have to be part of the diet, try to keep each one to a minimum, preferably less than 2 kgsDM of each. Why? As the cow progresses through each stage from dry cow to springer to colostrum cow to milker, she requires extra energy. If you are already feeding her high levels of supplement e.g. 5 kgDM maize, it can be very difficult to get her to eat more.

Finally, a big advantage of cows that feel full is they are less likely to walk around as much looking for food, and will be able to generate heat in cold conditions. This should reduce the amount of pugging and pasture damage during the winter, meaning better residuals and faster growth rates in spring.