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March 2010

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COW CONDITION IS POOR. HOW DID THIS COME ABOUT IN A GREAT SEASON?

Large numbers of herds formally scored by our consultants and a local vet have thrown up average cow condition below 4.0. This is serious because the clock has started ticking. These cows **must** be over score 4.5 before drying off, and for some that only leaves eight weeks to gain a half score plus.

How did this come about? Cow condition was too light at calving, and now they have had a summer diet of protein rich pasture (and turnips?) at a time when a certain amount of silage or grain would have been fed. The cows have mobilised body tissue to trade off the nutritional “imbalance”.

Will the cows put the weight back on? Certainly cows regain condition while on 100% pasture, but it will be a gradual process, and as long as the cows are picking out the “strawberries and cream” this will mean sustained milk production and less weight gain.

The reaction by some farmers has been to commence supplementation for weight gain – a big mistake. This adds pressure to the surplus of feed and the poor grazing residuals. Substitution of supplement for pasture must happen if this practice is followed, wastage will be seriously high and the ongoing losses from a failure to recover quality pasture will be significant.

RECOVERING COW CONDITION

This article sets out some options for reversing the trend and setting yourself up for next season.

Targets

While gaining condition is important, it cannot be at “all costs” and needs to be done while achieving some other targets:

1. Milk production and profitability are not overly compromised.

2. Pasture covers and feed quality targets are met.
3. Winter feed reserves must not be diminished.

To achieve all this you need to make sure you have some accurate information at hand to base decisions on. The 4 key pieces of information are:

1. An accurate profile of your herd's condition. This will require you to carry out a condition score assessment of at least 70 cows and scoring each cow. You need to make sure you also calculate the % of cows at the different condition scores. DairyNZ have a good chart for doing this.
2. Feed available on hand including current pasture cover and supplements, but don't forget to add in the maize if you are buying it in.
3. A feed budget from now through until the start of calving. This should be built around achieving target pasture covers and making sure you have enough supplements available at the crucial times.
4. Preferably have calving dates i.e. early and late calving cows identified.

COMMON SCENARIO

- Average herd condition 3.75 in early March and calving starts late July.
- Want the herd to be score 4.5 in Mid May and 5.0 in mid to late June.
- The **HERD** needs to put on 0.75 condition score in autumn and then needs one good month of feeding in June to gain the remaining 0.5 score.

The question is how do we achieve condition score 4.5 by the middle of May?

Options

- Progressively dry off cows – starting immediately with score 3 cows.
- Once daily milking, ideally split herd with the 1x/day herd growing in size as cows are drafted in on the basis of cow condition. Immediate start with cows score 3.5 or less.
- Twice daily milking but feed grain or maize for the autumn, averaging an extra 3 kg DM/cow/day over the above options.

	Progressive Dry Off	Progressive 1x/Day	2X + Extra High ME Feed
March – Mid May Milksolids per Cow	50	76	95
Milksolids - Value per 100 Cows	\$30,250	\$45,980	\$57,475
DM Eaten per 100 Cows	106 t DM	106 t DM	122 t DM
Cost of Extra Feed Eaten per 100 Cows			23 t DM @ 35 cents = \$8,050
Expected Cow Condition mid May	4.5	4.4	4.25
Value of Extra Condition / 100 Cows	350 kg MS \$2,117	210 \$1,270	
Net Outcome	\$32,367	\$47,250	\$49,425

There are further considerations.

- The cows in the best condition at calving are expected to have the best reproductive performance, which influences production in the following season.
- For the 2x/day milked cows with the extra high ME feed, the average condition might be 4.25 at drying off, but the range in cow condition is expected to be an issue. Unlike the progressive dry off, or once daily milking regime which is responding to the differences in cow condition with the purpose of evening the range in condition score.

Dairy farmers will look at their individual situation and their priorities. Given the above scenario the most pro-active response to cow condition, with a minor economic compromise would be the progressive movement of cows onto once daily milking.

Milklines March 2010