

Get out of the way!

Break down the 'barriers' preventing high dry matter intakes on your unit

Limited feed barrier space per cow is just one factor that may be limiting your herd's dry matter intakes. Read on and discover what other 'obstacles' are often put between the cow and her ration and find out how you can help her to maximise her intake.

So, you've got the ration right, or at least you have on paper. But it's just not feeding out right – the cows simply aren't eating enough of it and performance is disappointing. Before you 'sack' the nutritionist, or question your ability to add up, go down to the feed barrier and watch your cows. But don't look at what they're eating – look at how they're eating.

"Watching your cows can be a revelation. Few producers do it properly – they just take what they see each day for granted and don't really take it in. But try to look with fresh eyes," says ADAS' Brian Pocknee.

He's talking about 'feed fence behaviour'. Watch how your cows eat. Do they seem at ease? Can they get to the ration easily, comfortably? Or are heads banging on bars, necks rubbing on rails and dominant cows pushing their subordinate herd mates to the back of the 'restaurant queue'?

Realising potential

It may be just one, or a combination of these and other factors, that are standing in the way of your cows maximising their dry matter intakes and realising the potential of the ration.

Not having sufficient space for each cow at the feed barrier is a problem on many UK units, according to Dr Pocknee. "It's now more common to see housing with three rows of cubicles per feed passage and this often means that there's not enough feeding space.

"Ideally, when fresh food is first put out, all the cows that want to get up and eat should be able to do so. So if we're talking about a 100-cow herd, there

should be space for all 100 to feed at the same time. This means 70 metres of feed space – at least 0.7m per cow."

Subordinate cows

"Sufficient space will mean that even subordinate cows will get up and feed and all cows can feed for as long as they want to. If you limit space at the feed barrier, you limit the amount of time that cows will feed for and you will, by default, limit dry matter intakes."

Producers should also look at the head rail and the backs of cows' necks. "Any bald, dry and cracked patches on necks may be a sign that you need to raise the rail. These patches – even small ones – will cause enough discomfort to discourage the cow from eating," says Dr Pocknee.

He adds that many producers have altered and upgraded cubicles to accommodate today's larger, modern Holsteins. But the feed barrier is often overlooked.

"Yet raising the head rail in situations where it's too low can have a very positive effect. I've seen units where it has increased dry matter intakes by at least 0.5kg per day, sometimes a kilogram a day. And this has resulted in up to two litres more milk per cow per day."

As a rough guide, because each herd will be different depending on breed, brisket boards should be about 0.5m high and the rail another 0.7m above that – a total feed barrier height of 1.2m.

Brisket board

And barriers that slant away from the cow, by between 10cm and 15cm, allow

the cow to reach forward more easily without catching her neck on the brisket board.

Lifting the 'feed table' up so it's 10cm above the ground also allows the cow to reach forward more easily without putting so much pressure on her front legs. Simply pushing feed up to cows several times a day will also help to relieve this – and possibly any problems with neck rubbing.

KW technical manager Michael Marsden agrees that attention to detail probably has the greatest potential to improve intakes. "Place yourself in the position of the cow. Remember that cows, by nature, are lazy and are just as happy to lie down rather than go on an 'assault course' to reach the feed face.

"And the smaller, more timid cows do not want to get knocked about and will opt out of visiting the feed troughs with the frequency that we would prefer if it reduces their stress," he adds.

The route to the feed should be as short as possible and present no risk or harm to the cows – subordinate cows should be able to avoid the dominant 'bully' cows. In long lines of cubicles there should be intermittent points every 20 to 25 cubicles where cows can pass through.

Within reach

"And keep the ration within reach of the cows by pushing up to the barrier as often as necessary. Some producers do this six times per day as a routine," says Dr Marsden.

He likes to see a fresh, palatable feed in front of cows at all times, particularly the high yielding group.

"Observations that feed is eaten by the morning milking may mean they were out of food in the early hours. Always place more rations than cows can eat and feed any excess to lower yielding groups or heifer replacements. The

feeder should clean the feed face – not the cows."

Increasing feeding frequency can go some way to alleviating this problem.

"If more than one mix has to be produced per group per day then split these into a morning and afternoon feed – this keeps the feed fresher and reduces the risk of any heating impact on palatability and intake.

"Leave the feedstuffs in place – do not prepare and leave in the mixer wagon because air will have been incorporated during the mixing process.

"Remember, it is for the benefit of the cows – not the convenience of the feeder. Cows always come to the feed face when new feeds are provided."

And remember that cows continue to produce milk, despite the obstacles we put in front of them. So imagine what they could do if we removed some of them," adds Brian Pocknee.

Many 'obstacles' can be removed

without spending a fortune – there are lots of simple and straight forward alterations to equipment and routines that producers can make. "Just a few hours spent raising a head rail can push up intakes and yields considerably.

"And even where money is spent, the returns can be considerable. I know one producer who spent £3,000 on replacing and raising a head rail and he saw an extra 70,000 litres of milk over a 180-day winter as a result.

"At 20ppl, £14,000 is not to be sniffed at – that's a massive return on his investment.

And it doesn't take into account the knock-on benefits of his cows eating correctly, which can include better fertility. Boosting dry matter intakes not only boosts milk production, but it can also be the difference between a cow holding to serve or not."

Rachael Porter

Comfort question: are heads rubbing against rails?



At ease: take time to watch your cows' behaviour at the feed fence

