

Never underestimate the importance of an effective dry cow management programme

The gold standard



The decisions made during the dry period have far reaching consequences. We spoke to a nutritionist who identifies the 'golden rules' of a successful dry cow programme and a producer who is dealing with on-farm issues in 'real time'.

text **Allison Matthews**

With many cows close to drying off and the prospect of a buoyant milk price, it is crucial that producers take advantage of the situation and follow the first 'golden rule' as recommended by DSM's ruminant manager Adrian Packington.

"Producers must take the time in late lactation to assess body condition score as there is still the opportunity to do something about it. Cows should be dried-off and calve down between a body condition score of 2.5 and 3. Achieving this can prevent over conditioning in late lactation and if cows more than 200 days into lactation are monitored, consideration can then be given to grouping or feeding strategies."

Fat levels

"Cows that consume too much energy in the four-week period after drying-off are at a greater risk of metabolic disease," Mr Packington explains, adding that by looking at his second 'golden rule' and not over-feeding cows in the far-off dry period, problems can be minimised.

"Even moderate diets, containing anything from between 10 to 10.6 MJ/kg dry matter, can lead to excessive intakes of energy – between 40% and 80% above what is needed. Ultimately the danger with these cows is that they will not appear to be gaining weight, but they will be depositing fat internally, resulting in elevated non esterified fat (NEFA) levels."

Adrian Packington: "Following the 'golden rules' gives management a framework"



This can make them more susceptible to type II diabetes, which affects energy metabolism at calving. But these cows also suffer a much greater reduction in feed intake immediately before calving, which can continue into the fresh period. "Several strategies can be introduced to regulate energy intakes, including straw feeding. This should be chopped short – muzzle width is too long and will restrict the intake of forage. This will help to avoid the consequences of negative energy balance in early lactation," says Mr Packington.

Prevent disorders

By monitoring body condition, producers are on track to avoiding energy related metabolic disorders, which Mr Packington identifies as his third 'golden rule'. But with ideal ground conditions there may be the temptation to keep dry cows out at grass. He says that this can increase the likelihood of sub-clinical milk fever.

"Avoiding high intakes of potassium found in late season grazing reduces the risk of milk fever. As the 'gateway disease', milk fever is held responsible for the incidence of other problems such as mastitis and although the incidence of clinical milk fever is typically between 4% and 9%, up to 25% of heifers and 44% of second calvers can be affected. Avoiding sub-clinical milk fever is pivotal in ensuring these cows move through their first four weeks of lactation

Drew McConnell: "Low condition score cows benefit from targeted feeding"



as successfully as possible," he adds. Using his own 'golden rules', producer Drew McConnell finds he can make a difference as he prepares for calving in the third week of September.

"We worked with our Thompsons' nutritionist at drying off to verify condition scores, and then went through our usual practice of worming and fly treatment," he says.

"The first group of dry cows will be housed at the start of September, allowing us greater control of energy and mineral intakes through our out-of-parlour feeders. We keep an eye on body condition scores, as a matter of course, as we manage the herd and when the dry cows are housed we have the opportunity to correct any issues."

Mr McConnell uses a high energy blend to feed cows with a poorer score, but is careful not to overdo the richness of the diet. "We have found that those with low condition scores benefit from targeted feeding even in the final few weeks of the dry period and those in better condition benefit from having less milk at calving so we are careful not to over feed them."

Avoid stress

As the dry period continues, he dries off around 10 cows every week and ensures that each group is housed together. Disrupting social groups and stress can be just as damaging to health as poor cow comfort. This is the fourth and final 'golden rule' of dry cow management, according to Mr Packington.

"Studies show that frequent pen moves, particularly in the two weeks before calving, should be avoided," he says.

Investment in purpose-built dry cow housing facilities will deliver long-term dividends as the environment of a dry cow should be clean, comfortable and dry with adequate trough space (80cm), lying area (11m²) and clean water.

It's vital to know the real incidence of periparturient disease in your dairy herd. This will give a snapshot of how well the dry cow management programme is working. By following 'golden rules' a framework is given to the dry period, which is open to each producer's interpretation and regulated by what is feasible.

But by discussing the findings with your vet and nutritionist, a team-based approach can be taken and this brings all the skills together. Or to take it even further, write down an action plan and regularly review progress. Above all, use cow-based measures objectively. |