Sudden Pasture Shortages Version 1.0 25 September 2013

There have been two dry autumns in parts of NZ in the last three years.

If a sudden feed pinch occurs, the necessary feeding out of supplements to lengthen the round and maintain animal condition can be started before a crisis situation develops. However, do not forget that, if you lengthen the round too early, winter production of pasture can be severely penalised by the buildup of dead material in the bottom of the canopy. This very undesirable situation occurs far too often. It gives a feeling of security for some time, but will finally result in feed deficits at critical times in the cycle of animal nutrition.

Regrettably this often happens in mid to late winter, at or close to calving, when the only solution is to feed out high-quality supplements.

Feed budgeting is always important, but from late summer on it is essential. If seasonal cows are milked for too long into winter and cows become thin it will be more costly to replace condition than the extra milk earned.

Increasing one CS over winter takes about 200 kg pasture DM which in winter at 20 cents/kg DM is worth $40 or 11 kg of milk solids. If cows are thin then milking late to produce another 10 kg of MS/cow is very unprofitable because there is also the cost of producing the milk.

Pastures with excessive levels of dry matter, i.e., more than 4500 to 5000 kg DM/ha, will open up after grazing, have reduced tiller numbers, regrow slowly, and will not respond quickly to nitrogen applications.

If growth rates are still at 50 kg DM/ha/day in the Waikato, slowing rotations should not be considered until the end of April.

The secret of successful management over the drying off period is simple. It mainly consists of regular monitoring of pastures and cows on a weekly basis, and interpreting the balance between feed supply and demand for your own farm.

District trends are a valuable guide, but individual farms are usually very different, and it is therefore vital to monitor your own property!

Feeding too much fat can depress appetite and cause other problems, while too little can increase the possibility of ketosis.

Is it because we are not good enough at growing tender prime beef, and not good enough at marketing pasture fed beef? Or is it the human trait which believes that things are always better over the fence?

The demand for clean green naturally produced healthy food is growing at a much faster rate than our producers and producer boards realise.

Until recently, buyers bought food by weight and superficial quality - now they are looking to what is in the products, and how they are produced.

A recent news item mentioned that Japanese were wanting their edible flowers grown in pastures, not artificially. These same people would pay a premium for clean green pasture fed beef - if they knew it were available, and were told about its healthier production system on pasture, rather than in mud and dust, its lower sodium content, etc.

We are now being told that Japanese want fat "in" the meat. Why, because it has been promoted to them by meat packers, backed by grain merchants.

Pasture farmers and those planning to survive, so planning to start grazing should take note of the following -

- During the last beef downturn many established feedlots in America failed. When times are good, many of them net only a few dollars a head.
- Waste disposal in those two much bigger countries is reasonably easy, something it will not be in our small country, which is more comparable with Japan or Holland. In both those countries, the heaps of animal manure, shavings and mud are usually even bigger than their big farm buildings. They smell and pollute both surface and underground water, and lead to "dung running" which is farmers carting their animal manure away in the dark of night and illegally dump it.

- When times get tough, our low cost pasture farmers can, in most cases, survive. High cost feedlot operations are likely to crash, as they have done overseas.

Instead of joining the common feedlot beef production, our entrepreneurs should be marketing our beef on its clean green merits, which are -

- Naturally grown on sun drenched clover and ryegrass pastures, with natural herbs (dandelions, etc., provided farmers haven't stupidly sprayed them all out).
- Pasture beef doesn't have fat marbled through it, so can have the fat removed if necessary. Feedlot beef is marbled, and can't have the fat removed from within the meat.
- Pasture fed beef is usually lower in sodium, which people are now avoiding. Feedlot beef usually has salt added to the rations, so is higher in sodium.
- Well reared beef grazed on good pastures, where both the animals and the pastures are fed balanced minerals, and not force fed with only NPK which lower the mineral content of pastures, require fewer worm drenches and drugs, and there are fewer tail-enders.
- Beef produced without stress is more appealing to consumers.

An American maize seed company representative in Hamilton in 1995 at a maize growers conference, in answer to a question, admitted that their maize growers were subsidised heavily (50%) and couldn't cope without subsidies - despite their low cost machinery and fertilisers, cheaper sprays, good deep soils and favourable maize growing climate. He said it would be 10 years or more before maize subsidies could be eliminated, and I'll bet that even then they won't be. It is 2013 now which is 18 years now.

USA is causing maize growers in many countries to suffer low prices.

It is this subsidised grain which allows their massive low-cost feedlots to make a little profit. Our grain is nearly double their price.

In Switzerland beef cow owners are subsidised with a cash payout of about NZ$1,000 per cow per annum to encourage beef breeding. They then receive three times our price for the animal.

We can’t change or beat these things so have to be smarter and use crossbred dairy beef, grazed to prime, and promoted as such.

It has been calculated that each kg of dry matter should be regurgitated and chewed for a total of 30 minutes. This means that a fully fed milking cow should chew the cud for about nine hours for normal rumen function.

It is not only the chewing of the material that is necessary, it is also the production of saliva to adequately buffer the acids formed in the rumen. Saliva is a source of bicarbonate of soda, about 1.5 kg of which is produced by a well fed cow each day.

Saliva also has a bloat inhibiting enzyme which, if not taken down with the grazed pasture, can aggravate bloat. Hence the situation where animals are not blowing, but, after a shower of rain wets pasture saliva is not drawn out of the mouth, as is done with drier feeds, so bloat occurs.

Low milk fat content can occur by feeding low forage to concentrate ratios, or rations in which the forage has been too finely ground. Milk fat depression is typically associated with acidosis, off-feed problems and sore feet. Supplying the cow with adequate dietary fiber, both in terms of level and particle size, usually eliminates these interrelated nutritional problems.

Various buffers such as sodium bicarbonate have been found to be useful in maintaining milk fat content when high concentrate rations are fed. Often buffers will stimulate feed intake, making them especially valuable for early lactation cows. Recommended feeding levels of sodium bicarbonate are between 0.5 and 0.75 percent of ration dry matter per head daily.

It is obvious that the formation of saliva is important for the overall health of the animal. In some countries, bentonite, an extremely fine powdery clay, is spread over damp pastures to reduce bloat by making the animals eat more slowly and release more saliva.

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