Feed Management Software…….What We Have Learned - Part 1

Transition Cows and Feeder Efficiency

by Keith Sather

Keith Sather is President of K.S. Dairy Consulting, Inc., and Feed Supervisor® Software in Dresser, Wis. He serves as a nutritionist for dairies in northwestern Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota. He developed Feed Supervisor®, which helps dairies around the country manage their feeding programs.

As we all know, it is crucial that feed is accurately mixed and distributed in order to ensure that a balanced ration is presented to the dairy herd. Feed management systems, such as Feed Supervisor®, confirm that mixing errors today cause problems such as displaced abomasums tomorrow.

By using Feed Supervisor®, I have analyzed mixing efficiency reports from clients who have called reporting a rush of DA's. Often these DA's can be linked to a major mixing error from a previous day.

In an effort to eliminate such costly mistakes, many producers have installed a feed management system on their dairy. These systems form a direct link between the TMR scale and computer allowing the manager to accurately monitor each batch of feed produced. As a result, the employee becomes accountable for each pound of feed that is mixed. Since feed costs make up such a large component of total operating expense, having accountability with the operator can save the dairy thousands of dollars.

Once in place, a feed management system allows the manager to dig deeper in an effort to identify and correct inefficiencies in the way feed is handled and distributed. Often mixing errors are not entirely the fault of the employee, but rather the system in which they are asked to operate.

During the summer of 2001, we, at K.S. Dairy Consulting, Inc. and Feed Supervisor® Software, monitored operator performance on several dairies using Feed Supervisor®. Analysis of the mixing efficiency reports for lactating pens showed that the operators were doing an excellent job with an average mixing error of only .6%.

As we moved on to the smaller transition batches such as pre and post fresh rations, an interesting trend developed. The accuracy that we observed earlier was lost as average errors in the transition pens jumped to 9%.

The question now that needed answering became why there was such a big difference between normal lactating rations and transition rations. The answer to the problem was not completely the employees' performance, but rather what they were being asked to do. These rations that the employees were mixing for the transition pens did not match the equipment that they were using to complete the task.

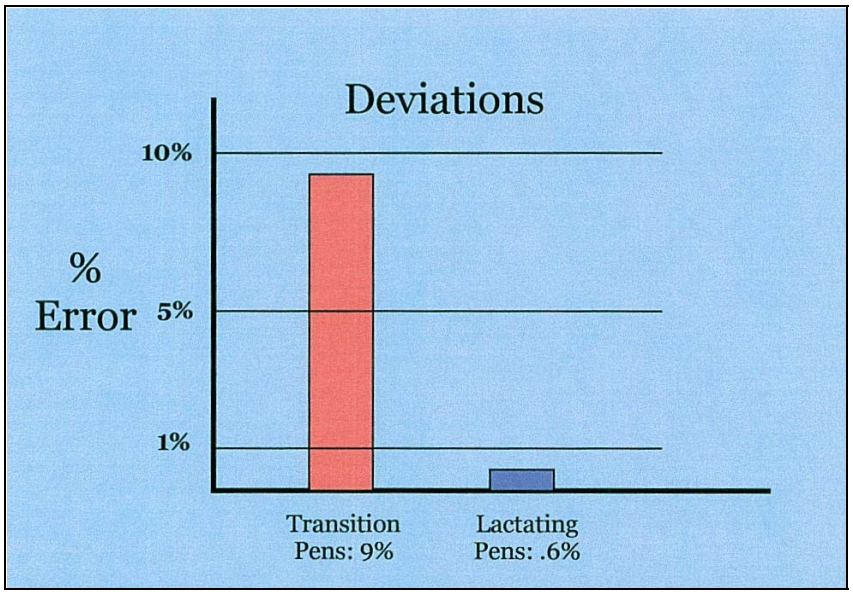
As dairies grow in size, so does the equipment that is used to mix the feed. Producers bring in large trucks and loaders to mix feed for hundreds and thousands of cows in the fastest manner possible. The conflict occurs when employees are asked to

mix a smaller batch of feed for the transition pens using the same large equipment used for other batches. As a result of this poor match-up, accuracy drops off.

Another issue in the inaccuracy of feeding transition rations is the performance of the mixer and how well it cleans out. When the mixer does not empty out completely, the transition ration becomes diluted with the lactating ration, throwing the entire mix out of balance. Finding a smaller truck that grinds and also self loads would be a profitable investment. A TMR manufacturer who addresses the transition cow issue and finds solutions to feeding inaccuracies deserves your consideration.

To eliminate feeding inefficiencies and the loss of thousands of dollars, a feed management system is needed. Feed Supervisor® has helped our clients recognize feeding problems and gives them tools to take the steps needed to eliminate them. Producers can monitor dry matter intakes, inventories, shrink, feed-related costs and operator performance and accuracy. Data reports can be evaluated on a per cow, per group or per herd basis. The program regulates rations to compensate for various changes and gives estimates for future needs. Feed Supervisor® provides wireless data transfer between the scale and PC. Implementing the use of the Weather Station interface allows dairies to adjust feeding programs based on weather patterns. This user-friendly program helps dairy producers become more profitable and fine-tune their feeding programs.

If you haven't done so already, consider talking with your consultant today about the transition cow issue and looking into feeding management software!



Graph of the research findings.

