TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

By David Greene

Getting the Most Out of Your Feed Management Software

Often feed software programs are used as a basic tool to make a load of feed. Most of the programs available have the capability to do a lot more than that. If you have purchased these programs, it is advantageous to get the most out of your investment. After all, they can help the dairy operation manage the largest expense on the farm. They are designed to minimize ration variation from human error.

For the program to be used optimally, the information has to be entered correctly. As the saying goes, "you get out what you put in." All the information from the ration should be entered as the nutritionist calls for, including accurate dry matter of ingredients, ingredient costs, inventory weights, pen counts, and equipment maintenance plans.

Ten key benefits that feeding software programs can help operations do to manage the farms largest expense:

1. Inventory Control – This helps the owner/manager make decisions on reordering ingredients so that the farm doesn't run out of an ingredient or have too much on hand, allowing it spoil or deteriorate in quality. It also allows the manager to look at future usage to potentially make economic buying decisions.

2. Shrink Management – With proper inventory control, shrink can be monitored more accurately. Shrink is the third or fourth biggest expense on an operation, so it must be managed or it can be costly for the farm. Software programs measure shrink on all ingredients if they are entered accurately. Some systems can integrate platform scale weighing programs that make it possible to have all input weights and usages so accurate shrink can be determined.

3. Loading Accuracy – This allows the manager to monitor the accuracy of his feeders. Feeders need to be tracked to identify where accuracy is so ration variation can be reduced. It is a good idea to have a weekly report that shows the dollar value of deviations for each feeder, as most employees understand dollar values instead of pounds and percentages. Loading accuracy can also be tracked by ingredient. Some ingredients may be harder to load the correct amount and cause higher cost deviations. Table 1 illustrates a feeder performance chart that can be used to monitor feeders loading accuracy.

4. Dry Matter Intake – When balancing rations and managing cows it is critical to know dry matter intakes. It is not as important to know on a herd basis, but understanding pen dry matter intakes is very important. Cows are fed by dry matter intake, so use the software to know the actual amount that can be achieved.

5. Refusals Amounts – True intakes are very important. Actual intake can't be measured unless refusal amounts are known. It also helps to keep bunk amounts at an optimum level to maximize intake and reduce shrink.

6. Pen Delivery Amounts – The right amount of feed needs to be delivered to each pen to manage pens of cows properly. Tracking pen delivery amount also monitors the feeder.

7. Pen Delivery Times – Some dairies like to follow the parlor with their feed deliveries and others don't. Whatever your management style, feed needs to be delivered in a timely manner so that a true 24-hour DMI can be calculated.

8. Training Feeders – The data that these software programs provide can help managers train their feeders. After all, the feeding operation is only as good as its worst feeder. Regular training is important and having daily data creates a training opportunity.

9. Aid in Making Economic Management Decisions – If data is input correctly, this is a valuable tool to help make decisions. Some programs have the capability of pulling daily milk weights from the meters in the parlor and daily milk weights from the milk processor. If this is used and the feed costs are accurate, the true IOFC can be calculated.

10. Maintenance Plan Reminders – One of the keys to keeping the ration consistent is to have a mixer that is in good operating condition. Some feeding software programs allow reminders to be set up for different maintenance needs. The maintenance history of the mixer can also be tracked. ❑

David Greene (dgreene@diamondv.com) is a Dairy Field Technical Specialist with Diamond V.

> **Feeding software programs are a wise investment to save thousands on a farm's largest expense.**

Table 1:

Weekly Feeder Performance Chart			
Feeder	# of Loads Cost=wk	Loading Dev Cost=Load	Loading Dev
John	52	$356.59	$6.86
Fred	47	$364.91	$7.76
Juan	49	$232.12	$4.74
Jose	32	$291.11	$9.10
Ramon	12	$187.99	$15.67
Totals	192	$1,432.72	$7.46