



Tactics for Tight Times

Planning your feeding program

Key points to consider with feeding

- Doing a sound monthly milk income and feed budget to guide your decisions**
- Building a pasture feed wedge**
- Buying feeds based on quality and value**
- Converting feed into milk, minimising waste**

With tough conditions continuing, the majority of south eastern Australian dairy farmers will be facing challenging operating conditions for the foreseeable future.

Most dairy farms are dealing with a shortage of pasture and home-grown conserved forages and are considering what feeds they should buy to milk their herds through periods of low growth.

In planning your feeding program, the first thing to determine is which cows are likely to return a profit in the future and which ones are not, and therefore should be culled.

The three main aims then should be

- › Design and feed milkers diets that generate the best possible margin over feed cost (thereby limiting impact on cash flow)
- › Protect your farm's longer term productivity by maintaining good cow body condition and health.
- › Protect long term productivity of pastures. This will enable them to bounce back quickly when conditions improve in spring.

While every farm situation is unique, this fact sheet is designed to highlight points you should consider when planning your feeding program and weighing up specific options.

Feed planning

- › Understanding feed costs on an annual and monthly basis relative to milk income is critical. The first task is to understand your milk price, milk income and feed expenditure and how they will impact on cash flow through until the end of July '16. Work can then start on a detailed cash flow budget for 16/17.
- › The cash flow budget needs to be built on a sound monthly milk income and feed budget based on accurate figures. These include an accurate head count, realistic ME requirements of your different classes of stock, good estimates of pasture and other home-grown feeds available, and allowance for feed wastage based on the feeding system used. If necessary, seek help from a nutrition adviser.
- › Consider immediate and longer term options in your budget for closing your feed gap, including:
 - › Stimulating growth of pasture and crops. For further information on this see the [Tactics for Tight Times Nitrogen management fact sheet](#) on the Dairy Australia website.

- › Extending your forage reserves with alternative fibre sources
- › Feeding a higher rate of grain/ concentrates per cow per day safely
- › Drying off late lactation cows early and / or culling cows to reduce feed demand
- › Agisting non-milking animals (dry cows and replacements)
- › Remember that cows that calve at a lower body condition score than recommended (between 4.5 to 5.5 on 1 to 8 scale) will have reduced milk production and in-calf rates. Cows are more efficient at converting feed into body condition while still milking than when dry.
- › Investigate fodder and grain market trends and what feeds are available in your area. The [Hay and Grain report](#) on the Dairy Australia website will assist. Information on the pro's and con's of feeds can be found on the Dairy Australia website in the [Feed.fibre.future fact sheets](#)
- › Ensure you have adequate fodder supplies first. Then consider other feeds you will need (grains/ concentrates, protein sources, by-products).
- › Formulate diets for milkers and dry cows that are nutritionally balanced, meeting daily energy and protein requirements for target milk production / growth rates within animals' appetite limits, while maintaining healthy rumen function. If necessary, seek help from a nutrition adviser.
- › Revise your feed budget as circumstances change (e.g. milk price, available feeds, number of animals to be fed).
- › The [Tactics for Tight Times Feed budgeting](#) tool may help plan the quantities of feed needed.

Building a pasture feed wedge

- › Resist the temptation to start grazing paddocks before pasture has reached the 3 leaf stage or canopy closure.
 - › Pastures still at the 1-2 leaf stage will supply cows with less Neutral Detergent Fibre (NDF) and less effective NDF, leading to rumen health problems.
 - › Pastures will take longer to recover from grazing if grazed too early. This will lead to low pasture covers over winter and reduced potential for growth in spring.
- › Be sure that cows do not graze pastures below 4 -6cm residual, as this will also reduce potential for growth in spring.
- › Use a sacrifice paddock / feed-out area to help build your feed wedge. For further information on building a feed wedge see the fact sheet – [Building a feed wedge](#) and [Managing perennial ryegrass](#) on the [tactics for tight times website](#).

Buying feed based on quality and value

- › When assessing a particular feed to buy, firstly check its physical quality, making sure that you have a representative sample. Things to look for:
 - › An unusual appearance or consistency
 - › Material too wet or too dry
 - › Any contaminants or foreign materials, which may reduce nutritional value or cause digestive problems
 - › Signs of mould, which can increase the risk of mycotoxins (fungal toxins).
- › Look beyond the price tag, and see how each feed stacks up in terms of its relative cost per unit energy and protein using feed analysis. Information on this can be found on the [Don't gamble with feed quality fact sheet](#).

- › If considering buying a feed you are unfamiliar with, ask yourself:
 - › How will this feed fit into your animals' current diet? Does it provide the nutrients that you are looking for to meet the production and body condition targets you have set? What specific nutrients does it supply in your diet that you need? e.g. fibre, energy, protein?
 - › Does the feed carry any potential risks? e.g. chemical residues, mycotoxins, weed seeds
 - › What is the maximum safe amount (kg per cow per day, % of total diet) that can be fed to your animals? For further information on this please see [A – Z of fibre sources](#) on the Dairy Australia website.
 - › Can you use the new feed effectively in your current feeding system?
 - › Can you store the feed on farm, without moisture damage, spoilage and contamination?
- › Confirm verbal agreements with feed suppliers in writing (i.e. by mail, fax or email) to reduce the risk of any unpleasant surprises. The key points to cover in writing are: Quantity, Quality, Price, Delivery period, Delivery point and Payment terms. A pro-forma that covers all these key points is the [Grain Trade Australia \(GTA\) Contract Confirmation](#), which can be used for any feed, not just grain.
- › Ensure you obtain a vendor declaration form from each feed supplier.
- › Ensure that the quality and quantity of each load of feed delivered to your farm is as specified in the purchase agreement. If not, you have the right to reject it.
- › Maintain regular communication with feed suppliers (particularly if supply starts to look doubtful).

Converting feed into milk, while minimising waste

- › Your aim must be to ensure that as much of the feed you have bought is actually eaten and converted to milk rather than being wasted during storage and feed-out.
- › Look for low-cost ways to improve your feed storage facilities to manage risks of feed shrinkage, spoilage and contamination.
- › If you don't have a permanent feedpad, set up a feed-out area for feeding fodder / mixed rations to cows to protect your pastures. For further information see [Flexible feeding systems: Mixing and delivering feed](#)
- › Check that cows are eating the diet. Watch for signs of health problems such as ruminal acidosis.
- › Ensure milk production levels achieve those in your feed budget and feed usage stays within budget. Review and re-plan as circumstances change.
- › Be prepared to manage the increased risk of mastitis, lameness, ruminal acidosis and other herd health problems associated with new feeds, diets, feeding practices and smaller feed-out areas.

Key points

- › Determine which cows are likely to return a profit in the future and which are not
- › Do a sound monthly milk income and feed budget based on accurate figures to guide your decisions. Revise your feed budget as circumstances change
- › Buy feeds based on quality and nutritional value rather than their price per tonne
- › Ensure that as much of the feed you have bought is actually eaten and converted to milk, with minimal waste during storage and feed-out
- › Protect your farm's longer term productivity, by maintaining good cow body condition and health and protecting pastures. This will enable you to bounce back quickly when operating conditions improve in spring
- › If and when necessary, seek help from a nutrition adviser

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