



Intake Management

Bunk management is a term that you have probably heard many times. We talk about it quite a bit when we are backgrounding and finishing cattle. But, maybe we should change the terminology to intake management because that is the thing we really want to manage.

This time of year can make managing intakes a challenge because either the weather is having large temperature swings from 20 degrees in the morning to nearly 65 in the afternoon or the newly weaned calves are deciding if they are hungry or not. Either way, managing the intake of the cattle can be more difficult than other times of year. It means that you need to be highly aware of what is left in the bunk at the end of the day AND the behavior of the cattle when you are feeding.

Many producers say they like calves to be a little hungry when they are getting them started on feed. The operative word here is 'little'. What does that mean? It is easier to identify the sick ones from the feed truck or tractor when every calf is so hungry that it comes up to eat (except the sick ones). But, this creates another challenge from the aspect that those calves are then all trying to get to the bunk at the same time. You better have a lot of bunk space if that is the case—probably about 24" per head. If the calves are all coming to the bunk that hard, we are likely to have one overeat and bloat. A good rule for cattle behavior at feeding time is to have 1/3 of the cattle lined up at the bunk as you are coming to feed, 1/3 that are getting up and moving to the bunk, and 1/3 that are still resting and digesting. If you feed once a day, you should still try to check your bunks twice a day. If you feed in the morning and the cattle are coming to the bunk like it's feeding time when you drive by in your pickup in the evening, you are probably behind them.

When we say that you are behind the cattle, it means that you are not giving those cattle enough feed for what they are wanting to consume. This often results in charging the bunk, rapid eating, and occasionally, bloated or dead calves. We want the bunks to be nearly slick or have scattered crumbs prior to the next feeding. A thin layer of feed across the entire bottom of the bunk indicates we are starting to get ahead of the cattle (feeding more than they really want). Those bunks should only be empty (or have crumbs) for about 2-3 hours per day. If they are empty much longer than that, we are likely going to have overly hungry and aggressive cattle. When you can see wet spots from saliva in the bunk, we definitely have a problem.

Twice a day feeding can be very useful, especially early in the feeding period. It allows us to get eyes on the calves to check for bloat or sickness and we have the information needed to make adjustments to feed deliveries sooner. We understand that it might not work for everyone to feed twice per day year-round, but it can sure help up front.

When we are bringing calves up on feed, we can make a plan for feed deliveries and increase intakes pretty rapidly. When we get close to 2.5-3% of bodyweight on a dry matter basis (15 lbs of dry matter

In a Nutshell:

- **Watch the bunks and the cattle behavior when feeding**
- **About 1/3 of the cattle should be waiting at the bunk**
- **Keeping cattle too hungry can result in bloat**
- **Being behind the cattle means not feeding enough**
- **Twice daily feeding can be very useful for starting**
- **If we get ahead of the cattle, back down slightly more**
- **Managing intake means improved feed conversions**
- **The eye of the master STILL fattens the cattle**

for 500 lb calf), we need to make smaller adjustments in feed deliveries.

If we get ahead of the calves and have feed left in the bunk, we want to decrease our next feed delivery slightly more than just the amount of feed left. For example, if we estimate that there are 300 lbs of feed left in the bunk, we will decrease the next delivery by 400 lbs. The calves didn't consume that 300 lbs of feed and are unlikely to consume that the next time. If we don't want to scoop feed bunks constantly, then we want to back down just a little bit more.

If we can get cattle to consume a pound more of feed per day, we typically see an additional 0.25 lb/d gain. We clearly don't want to give up intakes and have cattle constantly hungry. However, having feed in the bunk at all times means we are going to have a significant amount of feed that is NOT converted to gain. Managing intake by watching the bunks and cattle means we avoid large swings in intakes, reduce how many times we need to scoop the rotting feed out of the bunk and improve our feed conversions. Our intakes will be more consistent if we don't just keep excess feed in the bunk all the time to go out of condition.

Animal husbandry is still important when it comes to raising and feeding cattle. Reading the cattle is an art and it doesn't just happen overnight. The best managers read not just the bunks, but also the cattle, and get the best out of the cattle because of the way they recognize what the cattle need. "The eye of the master fattens his cattle," is a quote from a classic nutrition book, *Morrison's Feeds and Feeding*, first published in 1928. It was true then and it still is today.

Roxanne Knock, PhD

What do you need to be thinking about this time of year?

- Order your Stress Care for weaning—planning ahead will help ensure you have it when you need it!
- Talk to your vet about getting a VFD if you want to use Aureomycin at weaning time
- Remember to HEAT TAPE lines on liquid systems—this keeps the line fluid.
- Get 30-13 or 38-20 Hi Energy Tubs for grazing corn stalk residue
- Implant calves during backgrounding to get the best gain and efficiency
- Get forages tested for quality & have your Feed Consultant set up starting/growing rations
- Set up a herd health plan for vaccinations, de-worming programs, and treatment protocols with your veterinarian
- Inventory your projected feed resources & project your winter feed needs to plan accordingly
- Pregnancy check cows and decide on a strategy to sell or feed them- implant them if you decide to fatten them
- Get creep feed out for fall calves

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