

KOW Ruminations

Fully independent soil consulting-agronomy-nutrition. We do dairy nutrition from the soil up.

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EVER WONDER WHY COWS DON'T LAST ANYMORE?

Does anybody in our industry remember / know what a healthy / sick cow looks like?

Imagine yourself out cutting hay one day in the field next to your neighbors' farm buildings. We will call your neighbor "Jed." ("Jed Crabtree" is my favorite mythical farmer –an ornery sort-a-fellow.)

You aren't a particularly *nosey* person, but you can't help but see the brand new four-wheel drive pickup that he just drove into the yard. Wow, what a impressive looking machine. You think to yourself, "Gee, didn't Jed just buy a new truck three years ago?!"

As you remember, the last time you saw his "old" truck you realized that, yes, it was getting to look pretty rough. "How can Jed afford this?" you say to yourself. "How does he beat up a new truck in just three years?"

You are just finishing the hay field when Jed spots you and gives you a wave inviting you to stop in for a visit. When you get there, Jed shows off his new truck and you spend some time picking on him about the brand and how he must be making a lot of money lately, the usual stuff.

It's about time for both of you to get back to work when Jed's 20 year old hired man arrives on the scene. The first thing Jed does is throw the keys for that new truck to *Johnny and you can't believe your eyes*. Johnny has the notorious reputation for *hot rodding* anything with wheels –racing, off road four-wheeling, log chain back-to-back truck pulling. You name it, Johnny is well known to push a truck to its limits of performance.

Later that week while at supper with your family, you talk about what you saw at Jed's place. "I can't figure out why he lets Johnny tear around in his truck. Doesn't he *have eyes to see that Johnny is*

the reason he goes through trucks so fast?" Your son, who knows Johnny well, tells you that Johnny has been *bragging to everybody* about how Jed's new truck will out-race and out-pull anyone else's.

The next day you can't help yourself. After your son's words about the *bragging*, you feel that you wouldn't be a good neighbor if you didn't say something to Jed. To your surprise, Jed disagrees with your concerns! Jed says to you, "Hey, Johnny is a real *expert* mechanic. He knows how to take care of that truck. Besides, I just don't have the time or interest in learning all that mechanical stuff, that's why I hired Johnny. I *need him* to take care of things for me. Besides, who are *you* to question?! Johnny has two years of education from the local tech school under his belt! I have the best guy around to care for my truck."

Now you can't believe your *ears*! You just can't figure out Jed's thinking. Why can't Jed see the obvious? Why is Jed so *intellectually lazy* that Johnny's got him fooled into a free ride on a four-wheel drive hot rod? You say to yourself, "Jed would be much better off without Johnny's '*expertise*.'"

Right now you are thinking, "That is a ridiculous story. Who would be so foolish?" I agree, but now turn your mind to *dairy nutrition*. What if we think of your dairy cows in place of the pickup truck? I see farmers throw the keys for their herd to hot rod *nutritionists* all the time. Not unlike Johnny, I hear many of those *feeding advisors* bragging about the performance they pushed out of *your* cows. For some reason, I have never heard one of the hot rod guys express real concern about the repair bills or *long term* net profits. Some *hot rod nutritionists* are even saying we just need to *accept* higher repair

and replacement bills if we want to do things “right” (accept “production-driven laminitis,” etc.).

Needless to say, I strongly disagree. Net profit at the end of the year (partly via better marketing channels) is what the dairyman needs, not *the hot rod Johnny approach* to beating the Jones’ rolling herd average. Modern challenge feeding strategies have fallen far short in delivering the goods. Haven’t we had enough of this?

It amazes me when I consider how far the supply and service side of the dairy industry has taken the farmer away from thinking about *risk management* and return on investment to considering production level alone. The **average** farm putting 80 lbs/day in the tank is no better off than the farm putting out 60 lbs/day when all the *real* costs to do so are considered (*beyond income over feed*). It must be true that if a falsehood is repeated often enough, it is accepted as fact. Much of the tunnel vision approach to maximize production per cow has only increased cash flow for **the supplier** and leaves nothing (or less) for the farmer. In a day when we pride ourselves of great knowledge in the area of nutrition the *average* dairy farmer’s cows do not survive our treatment much more than 3½ years. Production per cow is up, but the farmer loses one of his only assets that can appreciate over time *by reproducing offspring* (sell any heifers lately?). Instead, he is encouraged to invest in more purchased feed, magic from a needle, and equipment which soon become valueless.

I would encourage dairymen to begin thinking more in terms of *milk per acre at lowest cost per cwt* than milk per cow. We that come from the **dairy nutrition from the soil up** school of thought put our focus here. Our slogan is to “grow your feed –not buy it” and to “push the forage –not the cows.” It is by following this simple way of thinking that the most profitable level of production will be found. Nothing can replace quality forage and investing time and money to get it gives much better long term net profits than “pushing cows.” *Healthy* cows eating lots of highly digestible forage are *impressively productive*. With a *ruminant friendly* high forage level ration program, milk can be produced at a significantly lower cost than with conventional *high concentrate* and/or corn silage *challenge feeding* programs.

Although there are appropriate times to enlist the

help of a qualified nutritionist (when troubleshooting problems) I believe that most feeding management decisions should be made by the herd manager instead of by someone who cannot daily observe the cows. Any dairy farmer who makes the commitment to work with **KOW Consulting Association** and learn our principles will soon realize greater confidence in his own ability to make ration adjustments and to spot potential problems. *Observing signs such as manure, cud chewing, and other animal appearance / behavior actually bring more precision than many computer “balanced” rations* and can keep you from being led off course by those who forget to look *beyond the numbers*. Sure, do the basic numbers (especially for basic CP, forage:conc, minerals and vitamins), but I do think that *desktop feed management is highly overrated*.

Computer generated ration estimates are useful if they are viewed as having the same degree of accuracy as the weather forecast. When our desktop estimates are given undue authority, they can actually stand in the way of successful feeding. Just as it would be foolish to wait until we are struck by lightning to recognize that a storm is upon us, it is equally as foolish to overlook all the signs and symptoms of the cow that suggest the ration is not balanced correctly. Successful dairymen and nutritionists never leave the cow out of their equations –regardless of what the numbers “say.”

This month’s consulting agenda is about getting back to looking at our cows. It is easy to forget about the cows when so busy with field work –yet it’s during the summer heat that they need extra special attention. Heat stress, beside causing milk loss, can trigger a cascade of reproductive and metabolic problems that will take another year to fully overcome. Let us help you prevent these problems. Are you a good “cowman”? How about your feeding advisor? Are you encouraged to “listen” to the cows or the calculations? Has your current approach allowed you to maximize *lifetime* milk production and yearly livestock sales? If you would like to start heading down a new road, we would like to go to work for you. KOW Consulting only asks that you purchase your vitamin and mineral needs with us and we will do **dairy nutrition from the soil up** –including working with you to evaluate your feeding management cowside.