

# Texas Dairy Matters

*Higher Education Supporting the Industry*

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## TRAIN FEEDERS TO MINIMIZE RATION VARIABILITY

Ellen R. Jordan, Ph.D.  
Extension Dairy Specialist  
Department of Animal Science  
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service  
The Texas A&M University System

Frequently at least three rations exist on a farm: the one the nutritionist formulated, what the feeder fed, and finally what the cow actually consumed. Feeders are an important component in helping managers control the variation. Develop a plan to train feeders, so they can help keep just one ration on the dairy, the one formulated.

Start by teaching them what dry matter is and why it is important. The feeder should understand that when it rains, a new dry matter evaluation should be done and quantities adjusted. If someone else is in charge of getting dry matters, encourage them to let that person know if they think the feed is wetter or drier. If they are responsible for determining dry matters, review sampling, testing and calculating procedures.



For herds feeding silage, reinforce the importance of face management. Explain to them that the face needs to be kept as straight as possible and loose feed needs to be minimized to reduce how much spoilage occurs. Develop a plan for dealing with the spoilage that occurs on every pile of silage. Impress upon feeders that spoiled silage should not be fed because it can reduce dry matter intake and subsequently production.

Determine the optimal loading order for the feeds being used. Then provide the feeder an ingredient list in the order they are to be added. There is no one order that works best in all situations. For example, when alfalfa is tough it may need to go in first to get adequate chopping to insure a good mix. However if the alfalfa is dry, it may need to be added last to maintain the integrity of the effective fiber.

Evaluate ration uniformity by taking multiple samples down the entire length of a feed bunk. Try several different mixing times and speeds with different load sizes to determine what combination results in the most uniform ration. Then train the feeder to not only follow the guidelines, but to look at the ration delivered to see if it appears uniform. Have them report changes to management so mixing order, times and speed can be re-evaluated as needed.

Finally maintain the mixer wagon. Sharpen or replace knives on a regular basis. Make sure magnets are in place to remove metal that could cause hardware disease. Check the accuracy of the load cells. And of course follow manufacturer's recommendations for other maintenance items.

The feeder is an integral part of providing cows with a uniform ration. Take the time to train them so they can do the job to the best of their ability. In the end, a more uniform ration means more milk in the tank.