



Your guide to transition feeding

New Zealand farmers are world leaders when it comes to animal care. We understand that in order to get the best from our animals, we've got to provide them with the best care. You may have heard dairy farmers talking about 'transition feeding', which is all about optimising nutrition for a successful milking season and happy, healthy cows.

What is transition feeding?

In the 3 weeks either side of calving, a cow's nutrition needs change dramatically - from growing a healthy calf, to gearing up to peak milk. Transition feeding is all about preparing your herd to adjust from being a dry cow to a lactating cow, to adapt to a big shift in energy balance and mineral demand, while enhancing their nutrition at just the right time.

Why is transition feeding important for animal health?

Good animal care means doing everything you can to ensure your herd stays healthy and productive. A successful transition diet plan will help cows build up strong reserves of calcium and magnesium to prepare for the added demands of milk production, and reduce the risk of metabolic disorders like ketosis and milk fever. As sharemilker Sam Ebbett has found, extra care during the transition period can make all the difference to a healthy year ahead.

4 things to keep in mind for effective transition feeding

Planning

The first step to a successful transition is having a solid plan in place. It's a busy time of year for dairy farmers, so knowing what, when, and how you're going to do it is crucial. The key is to not over complicate it.

Energy

Pre calving, the cow's stomach capacity is restricted by the growing calf inside her, so it's important to ensure she's getting top-quality, energy-dense feed during this time to ensure she's ready for the season to reach peak milk.

Fibre

Quality fibre plays an important role in rumen stretch and muscle development. This helps your cows build capacity to eat larger quantities again after calving.

Minerals

Balancing your herd's mineral requirements makes a big difference to their health - and their productivity. They need extra magnesium pre calving, and then a prompt calcium boost straight after calving.

Sam Ebbett is a sharemilker with Mark and Jacqui Muller in Eltham, South Taranaki. He chats to SealesWinslow Nutrition and Quality Manager **Natalie Hughes** about the importance of transition feeding for their herd of 530 dairy cows.

What does animal care mean to you?

"Animal care is really at the core of what we do. To get maximum value out of our cows, we've got to give them maximum care. I like to think of them as professional athletes - we've got a herd of All Blacks here, so we can't treat them like average Joes! They've got to have the best nutrition. I'm also a big fan of good stockmanship. If the cows come up to you when you go into the paddock, you can take a bit of pride in that."

So you've got elite athletes. How do you set them up for a successful season?

"Transition feeding is a really big part of looking after our cows, and it makes a huge difference to the health of our herd. What you do in those 21 days before calving can dictate what your cows do for the rest of the year."

How do you plan for a successful transition?

"For us there are three crucial times. The first is in May when we're winding the herd down, trying to minimise protein intake, to reduce milk. This helps the cows naturally take their feet off the gas when it comes to milk production. The second is over the dry season when I'm really focused on maintaining their body condition. This makes winter easier to manage without the added hassle of trying to put on weight. The third is around calving time, dividing out when cows are due to calve. When they move into their springer mob, that's when the focus goes on ensuring all their minerals are supplemented."

So what are you feeding them during the transition?

"In those 21 days before calving, we'll be feeding 60% hay, 40% grass. That's because the potassium in the grass can affect how cows can mobilise calcium when they calve. We try to offset that by avoiding effluent paddocks and using supplements to dilute the amount of potassium in the diet. We're really focussed on boosting the magnesium intake, so when she does calf, she can hit the ground running with no health issues."

That's great, and as you've pointed out, what you do in that transition period can have a huge impact on the health of your herd for the whole year. What's made the biggest difference for you?

"Well, we'd had a few problems with milk fever in the past, and working together with the farm owners, we worked out that our cows needed extra magnesium. For a lot of farmers, magnesium delivery can be as simple as adding minerals straight into their water troughs or dusting it onto paddocks. But our challenge is, being under the mountain, we get over 2 metres of rain, so the cows just find other places to drink. Best practise is using two different delivery methods of magnesium. We drench hay bales with mag, and this season was the first time we tried mineral lick blocks. It beats dusting paddocks and I was sick of getting dust all over my hands! We've had way less trouble with milk fever since trialling the lick blocks, so it's working really well for us. But it's different for every farm system, and there's no one way to do anything."



Natalie Hughes

How did you learn about transition feeding?

"It's been mostly trial and error and being able to see the numbers! If you get to the end of the season and see you're 10K short of solids, that's when you go back and see what you can do differently next time. When you're at 88-90% success, you're just trying to adjust little things to get closer to 100%. Even a one or two percent improvement can make a difference. So we're trialling things all the time."

What would you say to other farmers who are considering new ways to transition feed?

"A lot of farmers are scared of change. It's all well and good being in our own little world in Taranaki, but there's a big world out there, and listening to what others are doing can be really helpful. So I'd say don't be afraid to ask for advice - not just about what other farmers have done, but also why they've done it. Then put a really solid plan in place."

What excites you about the future of farming in New Zealand?

"The future is relatively uncertain - the rules are changing - but where there's change there's opportunity. Regulations can be scary but I think the future's bright. There's money to be made and you just have to find it. You just have to stay open to new ideas."

Over the past few months, we've been meeting farmers and growers all across the country, celebrating success stories and sharing ideas. Scan the QR code to read the other stories.



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