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How to reduce feed costs in your finishing unit: Improving feed efficiency

Some basic facts about feed cost efficiency when buying feeds in the marketplace are known by all cattle finishers:-

Buying feeds in the marketplace

- Buy feeds at the most advantageous price, time of year and load size you can – bulk tipping loads are usually the most cost effective
- Store these bought-in feeds effectively to minimise storage losses – especially important with perishable moist feeds such as brewer's grains
- Get your home-grown forages analysed so that diets can be formulated with the right complimentary feeds to achieve the desired ration specification for the cattle you are feeding
- Join an effective buying group where it will benefit the feed cost efficiency of your business
- Exploit locally available sources of cheap livestock feeds where you can

However, some additional basic information that we also know about the nature of the animals involved and the nature of the diets we can formulate are equally relevant to consider:

Animal related basics

- Younger animals are more efficient than older animals
- Bulls are more efficient than steers, which in turn are more efficient than heifers
- Animals in poor health will have poor feed efficiency (whatever the health problem)
- Making sure animals can eat to their full voluntary feed intake capacity will improve overall feed efficiency, so make sure feed is truly available *ad lib*

Diet related basics

- Concentrate-based diets are used more efficiently by the animal than forage-based diets
- Energy supply is far more important than protein supply for finishing cattle – excess protein is wasted money, especially if a low energy supply is also limiting performance
- Feed efficiency is slightly better with higher fat rations (eg when including some co-products) provided excess levels that reduce rumen digestion of fibre are not included (<7% fat in the DM)
- It is worth spending money on a good nutritionist to formulate your rations if you are not confident to do it yourself

Some practical feeding tips should also be borne in mind during the daily and weekly routine:

Practical tips that improve feed efficiency use on-farm

- Do not over-process cereals – simply cracking the husk is enough
- Make fresh, clean, palatable straw available when barley beef diets are fed
- Use rumen modifiers if required (eg, sodium bicarbonate, yeast etc)
- Increase concentrate feeding levels gradually when inclusion rates are above 50% of the ration dry matter
- Clean out feed troughs regularly - mouldy feed in corners reduces overall intake and efficiency
- Make sure cattle have sufficient access to feed – feed trough space is lower when complete diets are available *ad lib* (approximately 1 foot/head) than when all animals have to eat at the same time (2 – 3 feet/head depending on animal size)
- Make sure clean, fresh water is available – clean out the troughs regularly (this also minimises disease spread)
- Get the mineral supplementation right – co-product feeds can have variable mineral content

Finally some structural issues relating to the nature of the overall business need to be considered if both feed and overall business fixed cost efficiency is to be optimised:

Structural issues that can improve efficiency

- Batching animals by size is important (it avoids small animals being bullied away from feed)
- Set performance targets and weigh animals regularly to check they are being achieved
- Store periods are very inefficient - maintaining an animal at low growth costs a lot of money in feed, bedding and fixed costs
- Putting finishing animals out to grass is not cheap if growth rates are slow
- Higher throughput in a finishing business is more efficient (profit per animal place is key – that is how pig and poultry finishers think)
- Short duration feeding systems are more efficient overall than long duration feeding systems
- Is silage always the most cost-efficient thing to put in your silage pit? Be prepared to think 'outside the box'
- Am I buying the most efficient animals (are large, older, forward stores always the best?)
- Are round straw bales the most efficient use of haulage, storage and feeding time and space?
- How can I get my investment in these feed and fixed costs to produce more cattle per year and more beef for me to make a profit from?

Overall message – with dwindling subsidy support every beef finisher will need to seek improvements in the efficiency of converting feed into saleable beef (and how fixed costs are used efficiently in the process).