

Ten ways to reduce cattle feeding costs

David Hendy, independent nutritionist

Beef nutritionist David Hendy has picked out ten topics concerning feeding cattle to help producers focus on reducing costs and increasing productivity.



David Hendy

1. Monitoring/data capture

Monitoring feed performance, daily feed intake and feed costs enables producers to make calculated and timely management and marketing decisions. This is particularly important with the volatile rise and fall of feed costs, yields and availability, and not least actual on-farm costs for farm-produced feeds (forages, cereals, roots and proteins etc.).

2. Feed requirements and availability

Making early assessments of feed stocks on farm and managing feed supplies closely throughout the winter months will take out a lot of volatility from rationing and avoid reacting to a lack of supply later in the winter.

3. Feed purchase/transfer costs

Purchasing of feed is often the single largest variable cost for a livestock enterprise. Calculating on-farm feed stocks and quality prior to the purchase of any additional feeds will help producers make appropriate decisions. Getting as many quotes from suppliers to compare prices will often mean buying feeds much more competitively.

Use realistic cost and price projections when budgeting for cattle purchases and pay close attention to market conditions. Neither cheap nor expensive feeds are necessarily the right option to choose. The right feeds are the ones that are best suited to the stock to be fed and at the most opportune price, so do some homework.

4. Feed management

There's a vast array of feeds available nowadays. Concentrates, blends and compounds, coproducts, root crops, supplements, and farm grown feeds can all play a part. Good feed storage and practices are also important; making sure feed is stored appropriately and used efficiently to avoid deterioration and spoilage is key.

5. Rations

There's no reason why rationing and feeding management shouldn't be kept simple, but diets do need to be balanced for different categories of livestock. Individual rations can be used as a base across different stock and then other feeds can be added to achieve the required nutritional balance, e.g. a rearing/growing ration can be used as base for a finishing ration with further energy added. If in doubt, seek independent professional advice.

6. Livestock management

Don't forget to pay attention to key factors like having a clean, fresh, water supply (every kg of daily dry matter intake requires over 6 litres of water equivalent), housing, stocking density, animal stress, handling equipment, weather, and health among many others, all of which will affect cattle performance.

7. When to sell

Whether marketing live or deadweight, the driving force will be the supply and demand of the product. Along with tightening specification requirements and carcass weights, timely marketing to maximise the animal's efficiency and sale value can significantly help reduce production costs. The trade-off between cost of production, increased dressing specification, carcass weight, percentage of meat yield and carcass value needs to be monitored continually.

8. Health programme

Implementing a health plan in discussion with your vet will help cattle cope better with stresses such as changes in diet, social group changes and environmental challenges, as well as improving the overall health and performance of the herd.

9. Fixed and overhead costs

Labour, rent and machinery have a significant effect on the overall cost of production.

10. Attention to detail

Doing the little things well and regularly will pay dividends in terms of improving efficiency and reducing waste. These include cleaning of water troughs, maintenance of feed troughs and housing, investment in cattle handling to reduce stress, and not least maintaining quality control and cost of feed.

Further information on feeding cattle can be found in the Better Returns Programme Manual, [Feeding Growing and Finishing Cattle for Better Returns](#)