



## KEYS TO OPTIMIZING BUNK MANAGEMENT

You would think that with a good mixer wagon, computer balanced rations, ionophores, and lab analysis of your feed stuffs bunk management would be easy. But bunk management continues to be as much art as science – “the eye of the master fattens his cattle” is still true today.

**The keys to managing the feed bunk for better performance and profit are:**

**Consistency** – Cattle are a walking fermentation vat, and proper fermentation hates inconsistency. Be as consistent as you can be in all that you do; the amount of feed delivered, the time of day it is delivered, the order of the pens you feed, the ration mix, the ingredients in the ration. All of this will result in a healthier and more efficient rumen.

**Use Batch Sheets** – A big part of consistency is keeping the diet the same every day. Following batch sheets allows you to mix the same ration every day even when you adjust the amount mixed. As cattle grow they will eat more, as they eat more they need more of all the nutrients to support their gain. Don’t get stuck on feeding ingredients on a pounds per head per day basis.

**Read the bunk** – Every day, look at the feed bunks before you start mixing feed. The cattle will tell you whether to feed them more, or less, or to hold them steady. Slick bunks all of the time tell us we are behind the cattle and they could be eating more for more gain. Feed in the bunk all of the time tell us we are ahead of the cattle, they will eat less consistently and they will not perform as well.


**Use the SDSU Bunk Scoring System:**

0	No feed remaining in the bunk.
1/2	Scattered feed present, most of the bottom of the bunk is exposed.
1	Thin uniform layer of feed across the bottom of the bunk, typically about 1 kernel deep.
2	25-50% of the previous feed remaining.
3	>50% of the previous feed remaining. Crown of feed is thoroughly disturbed.
4	Feed is virtually untouched. Crown of feed is still noticeable.

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If you have a bunk score of 0 three days in a row, then the cattle should be increased by .5-.75# of dry matter. If you have a bunk score of 1 or higher, estimate the amount of feed left in the bunk and adjust the feed delivery accordingly. The goal is to see a bunk score of 1/2 one or two days a week.

**Don't let cattle wake up to an empty bunk** – cattle naturally have their most aggressive eating behavior at daybreak. If the bunk is slick at daybreak the cattle will miss some opportunity to eat and gain. Also, if the bunk is slick at daybreak do you know if it's been slick for 1 hour or for 10 hours?

**Know what cattle should eat** – we would like to think cattle are pretty smart about what they should eat, but if you let them they can very easily overeat and knock themselves off feed. Limit dry matter increases to .75# per head per day. Increase the feed delivered and then wait 3 days until you increase them again. Never increase the feed amount and the feed energy level at the same time – when you move cattle up to the next ration, always hold the cattle steady on dry matter feed delivered.

**Keep accurate records** – this is the best way to get a good handle on what cattle should eat and will also give you data that can be reviewed to see how consistent your feed deliveries are. The added benefit is that records can also be used to benchmark your performance and to document your financial performance for your lender. If cattle get knocked off feed, look back on your records to see what the previous 5 or 10 day average feed delivery was when the cattle were eating well; clean the bunk and deliver this amount.

**Never force cattle to clean up feed** – a feed scoop is an important tool in bunk management. Old feed in the bottom of the bunk can be stale or spoiled; forcing cattle to clean up feed can result in over consumption when fresh feed is delivered and this can result in metabolic problems and even death. Scoop bunks if leftover feed is over 24 hours old. Always scoop bunks that have rain or snow in them.

All bunk management costs is a little bit of your time and attention. You can't buy anything that can replace it. Based on research and on closeout analysis, good bunk management can easily reward you with \$25-50 per head in lower feed costs.