

Feed Additives in Dairy Cattle

Feed additives have been defined as a group of products that produce a beneficial animal response in a non-nutrient role such as pH shift, growth or metabolic modifier. They are commonly known as “white bags” because the majority come in 25Kg sacks. Examples include yeast, mycotoxin binders, rumen buffers and biotin.

The use of feed additives has increased dramatically in recent years; this may be because of advances in knowledge, new products coming on the market and the desire for a “magic bullet”. However, caution should be exercised before using feed additives. They are no replacement for good management – if only that could come in a bag! Results may be disappointing if they are just chucked in to the ration without a thorough work-up to determine the true problem, something that, in my experience, commonly occurs with products such as mycotoxin binders.

When considering using a feed additive think through the following questions:

- 1) Am I confident I know what the problem is?
- 2) Can I make management changes to achieve the same result?
- 3) What is the likely response?
- 4) Can I measure the response so I can judge if it is economically viable?
- 5) Can I feed the target cows only e.g. fresh cows?
- 6) Is the research evidence-based and what are the field results?

My approach is always to work through the problem to get a proper diagnosis and to try and make management changes. Can the use of a “white bag” can be avoided? For example, if a dairy herd suffers from SARA, could I add straw or reduce the starch load or type e.g. caustic wheat instead of rolled wheat? As a further example, if the silage is wet and acidic, then the use of additives may be necessary but should you go for yeast or a rumen buffer? This is where your feed advisor can help by looking at the data from trials to determine which additive is right for you.

I want to be confident that there will be a 2:1 benefit to cost ratio and I also want to know how the cows are performing before the additive goes in, expected benefits may include increased milk yield or solids, fertility or cow health. Some additives may be very quick in their response, e.g. yeast or rumen buffers, whilst others may be much slower, e.g. biotin, but it is important to be able to make a judgement on the effectiveness of the additive – it is no good spending a pound to only save a pound.

If the benefit is marginal then the use of the additive should be reviewed, this applies even if the product worked well initially – the additive might not be necessary anymore. I have often heard the phrase “I put it in as an insurance policy” or “It only costs 6p per cow per day”, however, 6 p per cow per day equates to about £2200 per 100 cows per year. An expensive policy if you don’t need it.

Further information is available from Will Gratwick at Westpoint Sevenoaks on 01959 564383, Tim Potter at Westpoint Horsham on 01306 628086 or Kathy Hume at Westpoint Ashford on 01306 628208.

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Qualified in 1998 from the Royal Veterinary College, London. He initially worked in mixed practice in Devon and then farm only in Wiltshire. He set up his own company in 2005 where he was sole veterinarian in charge of a few very large milking herds and then progressed on to his current position at FarmVets SouthWest a farm focused group of practices in Somerset, part of the same veterinary group as Westpoint Farm Vets, Kingshay Dairy Consultants and Farmacy.

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