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Poo Clues

What manure reveals about your herd's nutrition.

How do you keep a cow from losing condition without overfeeding her? This head-scratcher is not a tricky riddle. Typically, a decrease in body condition is the first noticeable change. However, catching nutritional deficits before a condition change can be much easier on the pocketbook.

This persistent question can be answered by examining the manure pat, according to an illustrated article from the Noble Research Institute. In healthy cattle, manure scoring can indicate the quality of nutrition a cow has consumed in the past one to three days, whereas body condition scoring indicates the nutritional history over the past several weeks to months. Manure is scored on a 1 to 5 scale, with a score of 1 being a very fluid manure pat and 5 being a dry, segmented pat.

A manure score of 1 is the consistency of cream soup. It can indicate sickness or a highly digestible ration that contains excess protein, carbohydrates, or minerals, and low fiber. The addition of hay will slow down the rate of passage through the digestive system and thicken the manure.

Manure that scores a 2 doesn't stack; the pat is less than an inch tall and will not have a form. This manure has the consistency of cake batter. Excess protein, carbohydrates, and low fiber characterize the diets that produce this manure. The rate of passage through the digestive system is very high. Adding hay to this diet will slow it down and allow for more absorption in the intestinal tract.

A manure score of 3 is ideal. Think of a thick pancake batter consistency; this is the typical cow pat form. There will be a slight divot in the middle. The pat will be taller than a score 2 pat, but you can't differentiate between multiple plops. This diet is nutritionally balanced and not excessive for the cow, or, hopefully, your pocketbook.

Score 4 manure is thick and creating a taller pile, and you can start to distinguish one plop from another. The consistency will be similar to peanut butter. This manure indicates a lack of degradable rumen protein, excessive low-quality fiber, or insufficient carbohydrates in the diet. Protein supplementation can increase digestibility. Cottonseed meal and soybean meal are excellent sources of this type of protein.

The least desirable score is 5. This manure is firm and stacks over 2 inches tall. It will have clearly defined segments and is very dry. This manure indicates the cow is eating a poor-quality forage lacking in protein and carbohydrates, and high in low-quality fiber. The rate of passage through the digestive system has slowed down enough that excess water has been reabsorbed in the intestines. This cow needs her protein and energy supplemented because her requirements are not being met.

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