Reduce feed wastage and lower costs

KEY MESSAGES

- Every kg not eaten adds cost.
- Wastage can add 20–35% to feed costs.
- Biggest losses occur at feed-out.
- Bare ground and wet conditions increase losses.
- Better systems and management reduce wastage.
- Allow for wastage when planning feed.

Introduction

With rising fertiliser and fuel costs, every kilogram of feed matters. Any feed that isn't eaten is money lost. Reducing wastage is one of the quickest ways to lower feeding costs and get more value from both home-grown and purchased feed.

Start with your feed costs

Feed is one of the largest variable costs on a dairy farm. Wastage increases the cost of both home grown and purchased feed.

Rising fuel and fertiliser costs are likely to impact feed prices and tighten margins. Reducing wastage is one of the simplest ways to improve farm performance.

Losses occur through:

- Delivery and storage.
- Mixing of diets.
- Feed-out to cows.

Feed-out losses are typically the largest and offer the greatest opportunity to reduce cost.

Understand the cost of wastage

Feed wastage affects cost in two ways:

- Feed offered but not eaten.
- Reduced feed quality due to spoilage, contamination or weather.

For example, 30% wastage on hay purchased at A$400/t increases the effective cost to A$520/t.

Small losses quickly become significant, particularly when feeding large quantities.

Allow for wastage in your feed budget

Feed budgets should include realistic allowances for wastage across:

- Storage.
- Mixing.
- Feed-out.

If wastage is not accounted for, feed demand will be underestimated and shortfalls can occur.

Feed-out method matters

Feed wastage varies widely depending on how feed is delivered.

Typical wastage rates:

- Feeding in dairy at milking (grain) 0–2%.
- Feeding in grazing paddock 5–25%.
- Feeding on bare ground or sacrifice areas up to 35%.
- Permanent feedpad systems 0–10%.

Management within each system also has a major impact.

Feed-out method	Minimum	Typical	Maximum
In the dairy at milking	0%	1%	2%
In grazing paddock, on pasture	5%	15%	25%
In sacrifice paddock, fed on bare ground, in ring feeders, or under a fence line	5%	25%	35%
On permanent feed pad incorporating a compacted surface and purpose-built feed troughing	2%	5%	10%
On permanent, fully developed feed pad with concrete surfaces	0%	3%	5%

NB These figures assume dry conditions. They may not reflect the full range of wastage that might occur under wet conditions.

Table 1: *Feed wastage using different feed-out methods*

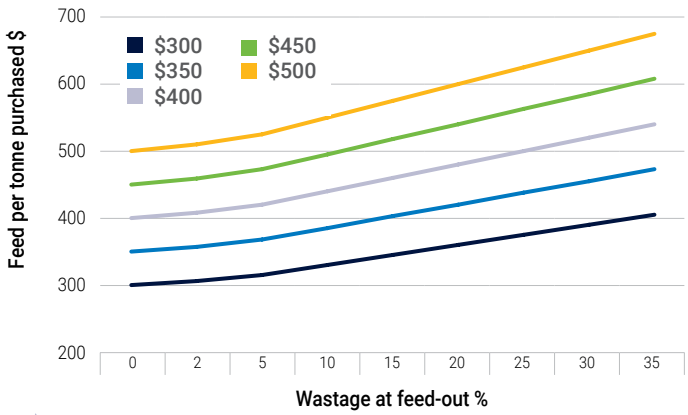

Figure 1: *Feed cost per tonne consumed by cows*

Reduce wastage during feed-out

Feed quality and preparation

- Keep chop length appropriate to reduce sorting.
- Feed fresh, palatable feed and discard spoiled material.
- Mix rations correctly when using a mixer wagon.
- Use additives such as water, molasses or oil to reduce sorting.
- Service mixer wagons regularly.

Feeding infrastructure

- Use feeders that limit feed being pulled out and dropped.
- Provide adequate trough space minimum 75cm per cow.
- Set trough height to support natural feeding position.
- Maintain clean, smooth trough surfaces.
- Use concrete aprons to reduce mud and contamination.
- Design systems to allow easy cleaning.

Feed wastage of different feed-out systems

Temporary, relocatable feed-out area. Forages or mixed rations are fed out on the bare ground in the paddock, in hay rings or old tyre tractors or under an electric fence line, etc.

Semi-permanent feed-out area. Compacted surface and low-cost troughing, such as conveyor belting and second-hand feed or water troughs.

Permanent, basic, feed-out facility. Compacted surface and concrete feed troughs or cement strip under electric wires.

Permanent, fully developed, feed-out facility. Cement surfaces and feed alley. May be covered by a roof.

Figure 2: *Feed wastage of different feed out systems*

Feeding management

- Match feed allocation to cow demand.
- Avoid overfilling troughs.
- Sequence feeding across the day.
- Clean feed-out areas regularly.
- Avoid feeding onto long pasture.
- Manage competition between cows.
- Adjust feeding based on weather conditions.
- Calibrate feeding systems to deliver accurate amounts.

Focus on what you can control

- Within any feed-out system, wastage can vary significantly.
- Attention to feed quality, infrastructure and daily management can reduce losses and improve feed efficiency without increasing cost.
- Reducing feed wastage is one of the most practical ways to improve profitability, particularly when feed prices are high or supply is limited.