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GIVING THOSE COWS A DRINK

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The role of water in the diet of lactating dairy or beef cows is obvious. But it is also vital in the diet of all beings. The only questions are: where, how often, and how much? The following discussion should help address these questions.

The location of the water for all animals is not only important to the intake ability, but also has a direct effect on the utilization of the available forage and the distribution of their waste. With very few exceptions, the water needs to be in the paddock. Animals that are required to leave the paddock to get a drink will choose not to return, especially under adverse conditions. Just think how you would feel, if while making hay on a hot day, you had to go to the house to get a drink – would you want to go back to the field? Well, since those cows are "making hay "for us, make sure they have a "jug of ice water with them". Whenever possible, movement of the water spot with succeeding rotations is beneficial in that it will also distribute the associated waste more evenly. Distance from the water also is important in that it affects the grazing intensity. The farther away from the water, the less frequently that portion of the pasture is visited. For a cow/calf operation that distance should be a maximum of 800-1000 feet, while with a dairy cow system, it is more desirable to keep that distance to 400-500 feet.

The amount of water required by various animals is one of the least studied yet most important factors in the diet of producing animals. We are in the 3rd year of an intensive "on farm" study of the water requirements of dairy cows. The items that affect the water intake are: temperature, humidity, wind, milk production level, diet intake, forage type, and forage moisture content. The preliminary results show that beef cows ranged from 8 to 25 gallons per day while high producing dairy cows ranged from 16 to 52 gallons per day. The lower levels were exhibited on cool, moist days when moisture was present on lush pasture. Conversely, the maximum amounts were attained on days that were very hot with dry winds while ingesting a dry, stressed pasture (try eating crackers). Also of extreme interest and importance is the fact that in every instance, when available in ample quantities, almost exactly ½ of the dairy cow's water intake occurred at the milking facility, especially if feed was provided before, during, or after milking. This becomes a significant factor when deciding the size of the water line needed to deliver water to the paddock. Ironically, the amount needed in the paddock by the beef cow that doesn't go to the barn and the dairy cow that drinks part at the barn ends up being about the same.