

Learning to Read Cow Signals®

Let's Look at Our Cows

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All dairy farms are different. Farms have different locations, sizes, inputs and cow numbers. However the biggest difference is made by people. Their vision, skills and knowledge determine the direction and the performance of the farm as a business. The one thing we all have in common is cows. By working on our ability to read Cow Signals® we can improve outcomes for both the cow and the farmer at little or no cost. Let's look at our cows.

Dairy cows are herd animals

From a cow's perspective

A lot of what cows do or not do, and why, comes back to being a herd animal. Natural herd behaviour is to feed and rest at the same time (allelomimetic behaviour). Within the herd there are higher and lower ranking animals, setting the social structure. Cows look for feed, water, rest, shelter and space in a settled and stress free environment. The better we can accommodate these basics for the cow, within our own farming system, the more healthy and productive our cows will be.

From a farmer's perspective

We tend to look after them as a herd. Especially in New Zealand where we are block calving our cows, they come up to peak production as a herd and get mated as a herd. At the end of the season we dry the whole herd off to manage a dry cow herd into their next lactation. We can do this well. But to allow us to do this better we need to keep the individual animal in view. The cows within the herd will tell us a lot about our management.

Back to what the cow is telling us

Both the herd as a whole and the individual animal give us signs or signals. This is their story. Look at what they are telling us. By learning to really 'see' we can observe, learn, adapt and change our management for the better.

What to watch

Risk groups

Cows should be free of pain, injury or disease. Prevent disease in the first place. Watch your risk groups and risk cows, they are your early indicators on farm that something could be going wrong. Risk groups can be your freshly calved cows, lower ranking cows, highest producers. Be observant and detect cows that are not performing early. Healthy and productive cows live longer and they provide better income and more working pleasure.

Waiting cows

Waiting cows are the cows standing around appearing not to be doing much. Cows waiting, or queuing, for water or feed. Cows standing being hot, looking for shade. Cows not lying down and ruminating, while they should be resting after feeding. These are all waiting cows. If there are cows waiting, standing around, we need to ask the question “Why”? These cows are your indicator cows. What can we do to enable them be more productive?!

Basics for the cow

Water

A cow consists of 50-80% water. All physiological processes within a cow to make her function require water. Water requirement increases with higher milk production levels and at higher temperatures. Thirsty cows eat less. Cows want:

- Clean and tasty water: Would you drink it?
- Access to water. Good flow. More than one trough in the paddock for every grazing. More than one trough on the feed pad and per group in the barn. Consider additional troughs at the dairy shed, and on lanes.

Feed

Apart from water cows need feed. The first question is, “Does my herd have enough total Dry Matter Intake?” Next is to understand the balance of energy, protein, fibre, vitamins and minerals. Some of the visual checks around feeding include:

- Rumen fill – an indicator of how well the cows have eaten today.
- Belly fill – an indication of how well the cows have eaten in the last week.
- Body Condition Score – an indication of how well the cows have eaten in the last month.
- Manure – an indication of how well the cows are digesting the feeds we feed them.
- Rumination – an indication of how healthy the rumen is.

- Access to feed – feed quantity, feed space and feed barrier/trough design.
- Feed quality – pasture budget and feed test information.
- Milk production data – an indicator of how consistent and well balanced the feeding is.

Rest

Cows will show priority behaviour when it comes to resting. For example, when deprived of lying time and feed, cows will lie down before they have filled themselves up on feed. Rest considerations include:

- Cow need a soft and dry place to lie.
- Maximise resting time:
 - o Minimise time on lanes and in yards.
 - o On a concrete feed pad, cows should only be there to feed, then leave to rest.
- Weather affects resting time: heat stress and rain.
- Lameness scoring.
- Housed cows need space: in free stall AND in loose housed systems.
- In any off-paddock system: check lying comfort in lying area and assess cows for dirtiness and lying sores related to bruising.

Looking at water, feed and rest are the first steps to understanding Cow Signals®. Observe cows with purpose in order to be able to 'see' what the cows are communicating. Don't necessarily accept what you see every day as normal, and therefore the way it should be. Keep asking yourself questions. Keep asking others questions: your vet, your advisor, your team member, your neighbour. Together we learn. We pick up on the signs and signals cows give us. If there is room for improvement in your management, make a plan. And if anything needs immediate attention, take action.

Remember

- Observation is having attention to detail.
- Asking questions is growing your knowledge.
- And acting on what you see and what you have learnt is farming with vision.