

Introduction

The goal of a grain-fed veal farmer is to achieve the desired finish on veal cattle at the right weight and age. Ideally, market-ready grain-fed veal cattle should weigh between 295 to 320 kg (650 to 705 lbs.) at 28 to 32 weeks (seven to eight months) of age. To achieve this goal, it is critical to have the right feed rations and ratios.

Veal is defined as cattle of any dairy breed or dairy crossbreed dressing no more than 190 kg (419 lbs.). This converts to a live weight of roughly 349 kg (769 lbs.), which is reached at approximately eight months of age. Producers are strongly encouraged to target a dress weight of 180 kg (397 lbs.) to maintain some flexibility within the system to manage veal carcass weights.

- Average daily gain (ADG) should be 1.2 kg (2.6 lbs.) or better. Targeting daily gains above 1.5 kg (3.3 lbs.) may require additional nutrient requirements.

Grain-fed veal cattle are fed a balanced ration based of grain (usually clean, whole-shelled corn) and pellets made of protein, vitamins, and minerals. A small amount of fibre should be offered daily to maintain rumen health. Cattle should also have continuous access to their feed, to encourage slower eating and stimulate chewing. Ensure there is adequate bunk space for each animal.

Bunk management

A lot of interaction occurs around the feed bunk or trough. Dominant cattle control the feed space and timid ones hang back, darting in for a quick gulp of feed when they can. One of the keys to proper digestion is calm eating. Ideally, cattle need quiet time to feed, chew, and swallow. Overcrowding causes the cattle to eat protectively, which means sneaking to the bunk and eating fast. These cattle eat less regularly and don't chew. Limited bunk space invites pushing and shoving. Running out of feed encourages gorging when the bunk has been filled. If cattle are forced to gulp down the feed, they will not chew it properly and produce the necessary saliva, which can lead to bloating.

The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Veal Cattle requires that feed must be provided in ways that prevent competition resulting in injury or limited access to feed by some animals in the group.

Feeding strategies to improve health and welfare:

- Provide feed ad libitum
- Avoid long periods of fasting between feedings
- Offer fibrous feed (straw) to increase chewing
- Keep a consistent feeding schedule
- Clean and sanitize feed and water equipment

Some considerations for feeding ad libitum are 20 to 30 cm (eight to 12 in.) of manger space per animal which is most typical. In extreme cases, where all cattle try to eat at once, allow up to 55 cm (21 in.) of bunk width per animal.

As a feed bunk guide there should be a maximum throat height that ranges from 35 cm (14 in.) for a 100 kg (220 lbs.) animal to 45 cm (18 in.) for a 300 kg (660 lbs.) animal. Adjustable neck rails will reduce feed wastage and accommodate animals of different sizes (Source: OMAFRA fact sheet, 2006).

Bunk space is one of the most critical aspects to feeding cattle. All cattle in the pen should be able to eat at the same time. If that is not possible, then the group size should be reduced.

Feed quality

Feed should be properly stored to prevent spoiling, mould, or unpleasant odours. It is important that the feed is appealing to the cattle to keep them eating. Any feed that is 'off' will prevent the cattle from eating and create metabolic issues that are difficult to reverse.

Cleaning the bunk

Old feed should be cleaned out of the bunk once a day or more often if the feed gets wet. It is important that feed is fresh to prevent overeating when fresh feed arrives. Keeping the feed fresh also prevents contaminating the new feed with spoiled feed.

Fines are of particular concern in the bunk. Veal cattle consuming fines could increase the risk of acidosis. It's best to clean the fines out, and if there are a lot of fines, to check the pellet quality.

Filling the bunk

When entering the barn first thing in the morning there should be some feed remaining in the bunk. Avoiding an empty bunk should be an integral part of bunk management. There should be feed leftover, but not too much, causing waste.

Veal cattle are the most aggressive at eating in early morning – if the bunk is empty that is lost gain. An empty bunk may also encourage gorging when the feed arrives, causing metabolic issues.

Having some feed in the bunk in the morning will help to gauge how much to increase or decrease the feed for the day by. If there is always feed in the bunk then they are being fed too much, causing wasted feed and costing money.

See Figure 1: *Scoring the feed bunk.*

Rumen health

To improve digestion and gut health, it is important to keep the fermentation in the gut active and to do that there needs to be a consistent supply of feed, specifically grain. Feeding veal cattle should be boring; the same feed should be delivered at the same time every day. This will improve health and ultimately profitability.

Water

Along with any good bunk management program should be a better water management program. It is a scientifically proven fact that the more fresh, clean water cattle have access to the more grain cattle will consume, resulting in a higher ADG.

A waterer checklist in the barn is a good start to improve the cleanliness of the water bowls, especially if it has been identified as an area to improve.

Record-keeping

The most accurate method to track bunk management is to keep records. Recording things like feed not eaten, fines, overall manure appearance, and if the bunk is empty are good areas to begin assessing to get an overall idea of how bunk management is working. This will help in deciding if feed should be increased or decreased. It can also be used to track performance.

Scoring the feed bunk

A simple feed bunk scoring system was developed at South Dakota State University that may help if the cattle are not performing as expected.

Figure 1

Score	Description	
0	No feed remaining in the bunk.	If you have a bunk score of 0 three days in a row, then the cattle should be increased by .5 to .75 lbs. of dry matter.
.5	Scattered feed remaining; most of the bottom of the bunk is exposed.	Less than 5% feed remaining.
1	Thin, uniform layer of feed remaining. About one kernel deep.	If you have a bunk score of 1 or higher, estimate the amount of feed left in the bunk and adjust the feed delivery accordingly.
2	25 to 50% feed remaining.	10% feed remaining.
3	>50% feed remaining. Crown of feed is thoroughly disturbed.	25% feed remaining (and less than a 3" depth of feed).
4	Feed is virtually untouched. Crown of feed is still noticeable.	50% feed remaining (and more than a 3" depth of feed).
Goals		The goal is to see a bunk score of .5 one or two days a week.

Conclusion

Managing the feed bunk will lead to improved health and increased ADG, which results in more money on the bottom line. Buyers look for consistent finished veal cattle; this is achieved with a good feeding program that includes a well-managed bunk. As veal cattle like consistency, so do the consumers buying veal – they want the same eating experience every time. Take some time to observe and analyze your veal cattle and choose one area to improve and focus on that, you may be surprised on the return. Good bunk management can be worth an extra \$10 to \$20 at the end. Can you afford not to manage the bunk?

For more information:

As part of your research into starting a grain-fed veal farm, you are encouraged to talk to experienced veal producers, visit their farms (while following strict biosecurity protocols), and attend industry events and meetings. No two veal farms are the same and a lot of valuable information will be learned from each visit and event.

Find VFO website producer resources here: <https://bit.ly/VFOProdResources>

Find the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Veal Cattle* here: <http://bit.ly/theVealCode>

Find Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs veal resources here: <https://bit.ly/OMAFRAVealBusiness>

References available upon request.

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[@Finishing grain-fed veal in Ontario](https://www.facebook.com/Finishing-grain-fed-veal-in-Ontario)

[@Marketing of male dairy calves in Ontario](https://www.facebook.com/Marketing-of-male-dairy-calves-in-Ontario)

YouTube: [Calf Care Corner](https://www.youtube.com/Calf-Care-Corner)

[OntarioVeal](https://www.youtube.com/OntarioVeal)

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