The largest two factors driving cows to the bunk are delivery of fresh feed and milking. Pushing feed up to the bunk does help, but the increase in cows at the bunk is less and for a shorter period than providing fresh feed or milking (DeVries et al., 2003, 2005). With this in mind, design a feed management schedule that corresponds to the milking schedule. Feed must be available and within reach as cows return from the parlor to the bunk. To keep feed within reach it would be best to have a bunk push-up within 90 minutes of the cows returning. This is particularly true in facilities where feed space is limited due to stocking density.

As I have spent the summer reviewing several time-lapse videos from various farms, the one thing that has come up over and over is the question of feed availability as cows return to the barn. The video would seem to show that as cows return they head to the bunk to look for feed. However, if feed is not within reach they go in search of a stall.

While it may be easier to schedule feed push-ups as a whole farm event, the truth is we manage and move animals by groups. Therefore, the push-up may or may not be timed correctly for when an individual group returns to the shelter. Adding the push-up responsibility to the person that is moving cows to the parlor and grooming stalls may be one way to ensure that feed will be within reach as the cows return.

So ask yourself, “Do my cows return to a bunk that not only has feed in it, but feed that is within reach?” and “How long does it stay within reach?” While this may seem like a small detail to feeding management, it remains true that attention to detail is what separates the high-performance herd from the average herd.