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Practical Feeding Schedule, Pellet Size Transition, and FCR Optimization in Intensive Culture of *Litopenaeus vannamei*

*Julie MP
Research Scholar, Department of Zoology and Aquaculture, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India
*Corresponding Author's email: julieraj16@gmail.com

Feed management is a critical determinant of productivity and profitability in intensive culture of *Litopenaeus vannamei*. Inefficient feeding practices lead to poor feed conversion ratio (FCR), deterioration of water quality, and increased disease susceptibility. This technical article presents a structured feeding schedule, stage-specific pellet size transition strategy, and integrated approaches for FCR optimization under intensive farming conditions. Emphasis is placed on precision feeding, biomass-based rationing, and environmental feedback systems to enhance feed utilization efficiency and sustainable production performance.

Introduction

The Pacific white shrimp (*Litopenaeus vannamei*) dominates global shrimp aquaculture due to its rapid growth rate, tolerance to variable salinity, and high market demand. In intensive production systems, feed management constitutes the largest operational cost, typically accounting for 50–60% of total expenditure. Consequently, optimization of feeding practices is essential for economic sustainability. Feed not only supports growth but also directly influences pond biogeochemistry. Excess feed increases organic loading, leading to elevated ammonia, nitrite, and microbial imbalances. Conversely, underfeeding results in poor growth performance and size variability. Therefore, precision feeding strategies integrating scheduled feeding, appropriate pellet sizing, and continuous FCR monitoring are essential for intensive systems.

Materials and Methods (Conceptual Framework for Field Application)

This article is based on established intensive shrimp farming practices and field-validated feeding protocols used in commercial ponds (20–80 PL/m² stocking density range). The feeding management system integrates:

- Biomass estimation through periodic sampling (every 7–10 days)
- Feeding tray (check tray) monitoring system
- Feed response adjustment model
- Stage-wise pellet size transition protocol
- Water quality-linked feeding modulation

FCR is calculated using standard formula:

FCR = Total Feed Given (kg) / Net Biomass Gain (kg)

Practical Feeding Schedule in Intensive Culture

Feeding frequency and timing in *L. vannamei* must align with circadian feeding behavior, which is predominantly nocturnal.

Recommended Feeding Frequency

- **Nursery phase:** 4–5 feedings/day
- **Early grow-out:** 5 feedings/day

- **Late grow-out:** 5–6 feedings/day

Feeding Time Distribution (Typical System)

- 06:00 AM – Morning feeding
- 10:00 AM – Mid-morning feeding
- 02:00 PM – Afternoon feeding
- 06:00 PM – Evening feeding
- 10:00 PM – Night feeding (highest intake phase)

Night feeding contributes significantly to improved feed conversion due to increased natural feeding activity.

Feeding Adjustment Protocol

Feed input is adjusted based on:

- Tray consumption rate (complete, partial, or no consumption within 2 hours)
- Molting phase (temporary reduction during molting peaks)
- Dissolved oxygen fluctuations (<4 mg/L requires feed reduction)

Pellet Size Transition Strategy

Proper pellet transition ensures efficient ingestion, reduced wastage, and optimal digestive adaptation.

Stage-wise Pellet Size Protocol

Culture Stage	Body Weight	Pellet Size (mm)
Post-larvae	PL10–PL20	0.3–0.6
Nursery	0.02–0.5 g	0.6–1.2
Early juvenile	0.5–2 g	1.2–1.8
Juvenile	2–5 g	1.8–2.5
Sub-adult	5–12 g	2.5–3.5
Grow-out	>12 g	3.5–5.0

Transition Protocol

Pellet size transition should be gradual over 3–5 days with mixed feeding (old + new pellet sizes). Abrupt changes may cause feed rejection, stress, and reduced assimilation efficiency.

FCR Optimization in Intensive Systems

Target FCR Ranges

- Well-managed systems: **1.2–1.6**
- Moderate efficiency systems: **1.6–2.0**
- Poor management systems: **>2.0**

Key Determinants of FCR

(a) Biomass Estimation Accuracy

Inaccurate biomass estimation leads to overfeeding or underfeeding, both of which negatively affect FCR.

(b) Feed Quality

High digestibility feeds with stable water integrity reduce nutrient leaching and improve assimilation efficiency.

(c) Oxygen Availability

Dissolved oxygen below optimal levels reduces metabolic efficiency and feed intake.

(d) Stocking Density

High density increases competition, stress, and uneven feeding behavior.

FCR Optimization Strategies

- Implementation of **feed tray-based feedback systems**
- Adjustment of feeding rates based on **weekly growth sampling**
- Use of **high-quality, nutritionally balanced feeds (20–35% protein depending on stage)**
- Inclusion of **probiotics and digestive enhancers** to improve gut efficiency
- Maintenance of **stable water quality parameters (DO, pH, ammonia control)**

- Avoidance of overfeeding and feed accumulation in pond bottom

Integrated Feeding-Water Quality Interaction

Feeding strategy must be synchronized with water quality dynamics. Excess feeding increases organic load, elevating heterotrophic bacterial populations and increasing ammonia and nitrite concentrations. This feedback loop negatively impacts shrimp appetite and survival.

Therefore, feeding decisions must be dynamically linked with:

- Dissolved oxygen fluctuations
- Ammonia/nitrite concentration
- Temperature and salinity changes
- Behavioral indicators (surface swimming, inactivity, feed rejection)

Discussion

Efficient feeding management in intensive *L. vannamei* farming requires a shift from fixed feeding tables to adaptive precision feeding systems. Traditional static feeding regimes often fail to account for environmental variability and shrimp behavioral changes. The integration of pellet size optimization, frequent feeding schedules, and real-time biomass assessment significantly improves feed efficiency. Furthermore, FCR improvement is not solely a nutritional issue but a system-level outcome influenced by water quality, stocking density, microbial balance, and stress management. Thus, feeding strategy must be treated as part of a holistic pond ecosystem management approach.

Conclusion

Optimized feeding schedules, scientifically structured pellet size transitions, and continuous FCR monitoring are fundamental to successful intensive culture of *Litopenaeus vannamei*. Precision feeding strategies reduce production costs, enhance growth performance, and improve environmental sustainability. Adoption of adaptive, data-driven feeding management systems is essential for modern shrimp aquaculture efficiency and long-term viability.