Bayou BEEF TIPS
LSU AgCenter Research & Extension

Winter Feeding of Beef Cattle

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INTRODUCTION

During the winter, even on the Gulf Coast, beef cattle must have supplemental forage and/or feed. Most cattle producers in the south spend approximately 40% of their operating costs on producing or purchasing hay and purchasing supplemental feeds. Feed costs then, represent the second highest cost annually with cattle production. This cost is second only to the original purchase price of the cattle. The overall feeding program represents a major input to cattle operations where the possibility of trimming some costs is possible. However, it is extremely important to remember that the nutritional status and body condition of the cow is closely related to efficient reproductive performance and reductions that negatively affect the cow's nutritional status will ultimately cost the producer more in the long run.

FORAGE PRODUCTION

Most beef cattle producers can reduce their winter feed costs substantially by improving their forage management practices. One of the primary ways to reduce the need for supplemental feed during the winter is to produce high quality hay. Forage quality relates to such things as crude protein and digestibility. There are forage production aspects that are under direct control of the producer in quality hay production. One of those is proper fertilization of hay fields and the other is the stage of maturity of the forage when cut and baled. Granted, fertilizer is a high dollar input but if you want to produce high quality hay, you must fertilize properly. Nitrogen is second only to moisture in importance regarding dry matter production. There is a high correlation between fertilizer nitrogen and crude protein. As nitrogen rate increases, so does forage crude protein. For nitrogen fertilizer to be most effective, other soil nutrients, such as phosphorus and potassium, must be adequate and the soil pH must be appropriate for the forage being produced. Soil fertility tests are a must for proper fertilization of forage. The other critical part of quality hay production is to harvest the forage at the appropriate stage of maturity. With increasing maturity, there is a decrease in digestibility of the forage. The forage nutritive value will decline with time so it is imperative that the forage be harvested while nutritive value is high. The critical aspect of forage production management is to have enough dry matter in the field to justify the cost of cutting and baling and in the end, have a good balance of dry matter production and quality hay. The method of storing hay can be critical to minimizing dry matter loss and maintaining nutrient value. Some research shows as much as 50% loss of dry matter when large bales are stored outside. If you store your round bales outside, they just cost you twice as much. Many producers believe that a good hay storage barn is the only building on the farm that will actually pay for itself.

RYEGRASS SUPPLEMENTATION

Many beef cattle producers in the Gulf Coast use cool season forage pasture for winter supplementation. Cattle performance is usually good to excellent, and the cost of fresh forage can be less than hay and supplements or supplements alone. Most winter feeding programs in the Gulf Coast area involve some sort of hay plus supplemental feeding. The supplement can be molasses based liquid feed, protein tubs, mixed feed, range cubes, soybean hulls or cottonseed meal with salt. All these supplements can be utilized to provide proper winter nutrition for cattle. However, these methods can be more expensive than cool season forage production. One of the least expensive forms of winter supplementation is ryegrass that is limited grazed. In a limit grazing system, the cattle are allowed to graze ryegrass on limited basis of two to three hours per day and spend the rest of the day on dormant grass pasture where they may receive supplemental hay. Producers that have bermuda grass can over seed ryegrass successfully. Depending on the weather and the amount of rainfall, grazing on ryegrass can usually begin in early to mid December. Remember, no matter what winter supplementation method you use, do not neglect mineral supplementation as well.

SUMMARY

Reducing winter feed costs, while maintaining performance is critical for producer profit. By evaluating cattle nutritional requirements, quality forage nutrient contribution, and evaluating alternative supplemental sources, an optimal winter feeding program can be designed. The lowest cost will not always be the best program for you. You also have to consider convenience, available labor and your feeding system. First, determine your costs and then compare differences with other factors that affect your operation.

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