

Nutrition for Beef Cows During Winter Weather is Key for Future Calf Crops

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Close attention to beef cows' nutrition during this winter's wicked weather will mean a healthier calf crop this spring and possibly a larger one a year from now, according to a North Dakota State University beef cattle specialist.

"Everybody's thinking about today and not the spring or fall of 2009," says Greg Lardy at NDSU's Animal Sciences Department. "But if we don't keep these cows in proper condition today, we'll see the result in next year's calf crop too."

Lardy says the key for the short term is to keep cows in condition to deliver a healthy calf this spring and produce enough milk for that calf. That means paying close attention to the nutritional needs of those cows. And that won't be easy this winter on the upper Great Plains with limited feed supplies and the difficulty of getting feed to cows in the aftermath of recent storms, Lardy admits.

But attention to cows' nutritional needs now will pay off with healthier calves at birth and heavier weaning weights next fall. It will also improve the cows' rebreeding potential and that means a bigger calf crop next year, he adds.

For now, producers should strive to have their cattle at a body condition score of five to six at calving. Body condition scores rate the energy reserves of a cow. A score of one means an emaciated cow while a 9 indicates an obese cow (see NDSU Extension publication AS1026).

"If you have a cow that's in good condition you need to maintain her condition. More importantly, if you have a thin cow, you need to improve her condition before calving," Lardy says.

Producers may need to use lower quality forages or straws to stretch hay supplies and supplement diets with grain to improve or maintain body condition. Lardy says energy and protein requirements of cattle are especially important during cold and stormy weather.

Thin cows with little insulating fat have especially serious needs. "They need that extra energy just to maintain their body temperatures," he says.

"You absolutely have to meet those requirements if you're going to maintain or improve the condition of your cows," he says. "And vitamin A is another key nutrient at this time of the year," especially in low-quality forages.

Other nutrient deficiencies can also cause problems, Lardy says. But those concerns vary by location and most producers are aware of how to deal with them regardless of the weather. If forages are the backbone of the feeding program, then identifying the nutrient content of those forages is essential for establishing where deficiencies might occur, he adds.

"Severe winter weather just seems to amplify any problems that already exist," he says.

"Once cows have calved, producers need to continue to monitor their cows," Lardy says. "Cows shouldn't lose excessive weight during early lactation."

For more information contact your county office of the NDSU Extension Service or Greg Lardy.

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