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BeefTalk: Alfalfa Is a Great Supplement

Grandpa always said sheep get the hay first, cows second and the horses third.

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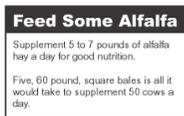
There was a pleasant view as I went to the auction barn the other day. The semi-trailer truck was sitting in the parking lot with a load of alfalfa hay. Under many situations, no one would really notice, but the long, drawn-out winter has many producers checking their hay inventory as frequently as the weather forecast.

Sometime ago, the late Joe Whiteman from Oklahoma State University mentioned that livestock husbandry should be simple. He said that we tend to complicate the ins and outs and sometimes even get confused as to whether we are "in" or "out." So, Whiteman believed in alfalfa. He fed sheep alfalfa for years with very few problems.

"It was the alfalfa," he always would say. Having a rather strong sheep background and having taught many producers how to raise sheep, I adopted the same principle. If in doubt, give the ewe a cake of alfalfa hay. That cake, in terms of a herd, would be a pound per head prior to lambing.

The old saying, "A sick sheep is a dead sheep," never held true when the ration was right and that cake of alfalfa hay was available. You might be asking why in the world beef producers need to know about feeding sheep. Well, grandpa always said sheep get the hay first, cows second and the horses third. In fact, the truth be told, we generally couldn't find the horses. They were camped somewhere enjoying winter because ample roughage was available and they had good pickings.

Images



Feed Some Alfalfa

columns

[Dairy Focus: Dairy Focus: Economic Conditions Could Get Ugly](#) (2009-02-05)
The economy likely will get worse before it gets better for dairy producers. [FULL STORY](#)

[Biofuel Economics: New Energy Economics: Visit Our New Wind Energy Web Site](#) (2009-02-26) The Web site is up 24/7, so people can access the information at their convenience. [FULL STORY](#)

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Alfalfa Is a Great Supplement](#) (2009-02-26) Grandpa always said sheep get the hay first, cows second and the horses third. [FULL STORY](#)

[Hortiscope: Hortiscope](#) (2009-02-26)
Ron Smith answers questions about plants, trees and gardens. [FULL STORY](#)

[Livestock Market Advisor: Market Advisor: U.S. Sheep and Lamb Inventories Decline](#) (2009-02-12)
Current prices are being impacted by the economic meltdown and less demand for all meat, including lamb. [FULL STORY](#)

[Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Stir-fry Your Way to a Healthier Diet](#) (2009-02-26) When I began stir-frying ginger, garlic and chicken, my children gathered in the kitchen to enjoy the pleasant aroma. [FULL STORY](#)

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Back to the cattle pens. Those cows need feed and, in winters like this, if production is to be maintained, Whiteman's sheep philosophy raises a point. In a round-about way, the well-being of ruminates (cows, sheep and the many other four-stomached, four-legged, four-hoofed animals) comes down to having a mix of roughages available.

Usually, summer brings abundant green grass. The winter is quite dependent on some of that green grass being preserved. The key to having good nutrition is the word "green." As cattle are confined and the availability of forage becomes physically restrictive or cost prohibitive, the green tends to disappear from the ration. More and more feed is delivered, but it is brownish, which is the color of mature, older forage. The other feed is gold, which is the color of straw and many of the grain products that are cattle supplements.

All rations need balance. The correct supplements must be added under the advice of a good nutritionist. These rations will work, but, if push comes to shove and you have more low-quality feed, there is a very real possibility there will be detrimental effects to the late-pregnancy or early-lactating cows. Therefore, that semi-trailer load of alfalfa certainly reminded me of what Whiteman would say, "Feed some alfalfa."

Often, the price seems high, but one is not going to feed alfalfa to beef cows at an all-you-can-eat rate. Just like the ewe, a pound of alfalfa a day really helps and a cow is no different. To start calculating a ration, 5 to 7 pounds of alfalfa a day would be a great starting point for any nutritionist. Unfortunately, the alfalfa is not always available, but the feed dealer may have some alfalfa-based supplements or cubes that certainly would help a cow.

The point is relatively simple. The world is better off with a mix of things and so are cows. Having some variety helps cover up things one type of feed may be lacking.

In the cow business, we tend to start feeding a stack of hay, which is unlike the feedlot calf that gets a balanced ration every day. The cow may be stuck eating out of one haystack. If that stack is brown or golden, with no evidence of wellpreserved green plants, look for a supplement.

The next time you see a load of alfalfa hay, don't be so quick to dismiss the hay as dairy feed. Maybe, think twice about it and have some alfalfa delivered to your place.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

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