

Beef talk 752: Feed Those Cows the Right Amount of Feed

A common mistake that is made as the weather warms is to reduce the feed a little bit.

With the temporary letup from the harshness of winter weather, cow-calf producers are breathing a sigh of relief. The arctic cold is held at bay and the world seems to go a little better.

However, the cows still need to be fed. In fact, a common mistake that is made as the weather warms is to reduce the feed a little bit. In reality, yes, that extra feed for body heat may not be needed, but every day that a cow gets closer to birth, the more demanding the pregnancy becomes.

The calf is gaining weight and putting extra demands on the cow regardless of the weather. In fact, I doubt that the calf even knows how cold the outside world is, at least not until that moment of exposure at birth. Somehow that drop from the cow's body temperature to the environmental temperature should jump-start any system.

Nevertheless, the cows need to be fed and there is no other option. Some producers prefer to calve early and some late, but most pick spring to calve and keep their fingers crossed with the hope that Mother Nature sends good sunshine and rain instead of heartbreaking storms.

As we all know, there is a cattle management system for every producer and the producer needs to be comfortable with whatever system is utilized. What is even more important is that every system still must feed the cow. Perhaps if as much time was spent discussing the nutrient requirements of beef as the merits of different systems, all the cows would be better off.

When a producer visits with his or her nutritionist, four questions come to mind quickly: How much do the cows weigh and milk so the nutritionist can calculate how much feed the producer needs to feed each cow? How is the environment affecting the feed requirements of the cattle? What stage of production are the cattle in? What do you have for feed?

It really does not make any difference as to what management system the producer has developed. What is more important is that the producer be able to answer the questions factually so that the nutritionist can calculate a ration or feeding plan correctly.

The nutritionist will take into consideration the cows, environment, stage of production, feeds available and the nutritional analysis of those feeds when the ration is formulated. Getting the correct answers is critical.

For example, let's take the very first question: How big are the cows? When I visited with Greg Lardy, Animal Sciences Department head and professor at North Dakota State University, he shared some calculations that help show the amount of feed that a cow would need at a given environment (5 degrees F and no mud), a given milk production (17.6 pounds of peak milk during lactation), a given stage of production (cow in the last two-thirds of pregnancy) and given feed resource (55 percent total digestible nutrients forage). Lardy calculated the dry-matter intake for every 100 pounds of cow weighing from 1,000 to 2,000 pounds. The 1,000-pound cow required 26.5 pounds of dry matter per day, while the 2,000-pound cow required 42.2 pounds of dry matter per day.

Obviously, the larger cow needs not only a fork or two more hay, but it needs 15.7 pounds more dry matter than the smaller cow. This is not good or bad. It simply is a biological need. Likewise, the smaller cow will waste the feed that is provided in addition to what she needs, so know your cows and how much they need to eat.

If we use Lardy's experience in beef cattle nutrition and accept his assumptions, the 1,000-pound cow needs 26.5 pounds of dry-matter forage daily. Here are the other daily dry matter needs for different weight cows:

- 1,100-pound cow needs 28.2 pounds of dry matter
- 1,200-pound cow needs 29.9 pounds of dry matter

- 1,300-pound cow needs 31.5 pounds of dry matter
- 1,400-pound cow needs 33.1 pounds of dry matter
- 1,500-pound cow needs 34.7 pounds of dry matter
- 1,600-pound cow needs 36.2 pounds of dry matter
- 1,700-pound cow needs 37.8 pounds of dry matter
- 1,800-pound cow needs 39.3 pounds of dry matter
- 1,900-pound cow needs 40.7 pounds of dry matter
- 2,000-pound cow needs 42.2 pounds of dry matter

Again, this is simply an example to illustrate how the amount of feed a cow needs varies considerably by body weight. Other factors also influence the amount of dry-matter forage a cow needs to consume daily.

Now is not the time to misjudge cow nutrition. When you visit with the nutritionist, make sure you adjust the cow feeding for your environment, cow size, expected milk production and cows at calving time. Have a good feed analysis in hand and be able to describe your feeding system so appropriate feed wastage can be factored in.

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.

Beef Cattle Nutrient Requirements	
Cow Weight	Estimated Dry Matter Intake
	(Pounds per Day)
1000	26.5
1100	28.2
1200	29.9
1300	31.5
1400	33.1
1500	34.7
1600	36.2
1700	37.8
1800	39.3
1900	40.7
2000	42.2

Source and Assumptions –
 Greg Lardy, Animal Science Department Head at North Dakota State University. Based on the 1996 NRC Beef Cattle Nutrient Requirements Table Generator.
 Dry Matter feed required at 5 degrees and no mud, 17.6 lbs peak milk during lactation, last two-thirds of pregnancy and 55% TDN forage.