

## **BeefTalk 790: Now is the Time to Save Feed Costs**

*When feed costs are too high, consider selling the higher-maintenance cows.*

Now is the time to make the necessary adjustments for the future of your cowherd.

The cow is slowing down. The cow is not challenged by cold or heat; the cow is living in a rather neutral environment. Let's say the cow has some time off. This is what makes a cow happy.

There is aftermath grazing, walking the fields and browsing assorted forages, occasionally picking up spilled grain, and accumulating the food in the rumen, where it starts the process of being converted into protein or other products we, as humans, use. These products find their way into our food chain by maintaining the cow as the source of production, keeping her in shape or directly as weight gain on this year's calf crop.

All livestock producers may not have crop aftermath available, but they still should seek out the opportunity. Unfortunately, water, fencing, hauling, facilities, neighbors, roads and other non-livestock habitats often limit the opportunity. However, with the increased emphasis on soil health and cover crops, a producer should seek out a site and simply develop it for the purpose of late-season grazing, utilizing the acres and acres of crop aftermath.

But regardless, today's main production point is cows will regain body condition more easily when production demands are low. For example, a moderately milking 1,300-pound cow needs about 30 pounds of good green hay a day prior to weaning. After weaning, that same cow would need only 26 to 27 pounds of that same hay.

In other words, the cow is no longer milking and does not need the feed. If the feed, such as fall aftermath grazing, is offered, the cow has the capacity to eat more than she needs and will store that extra feed as improved body condition.

Crop aftermath grazing usually is plentiful. Just like the producer who eats at the local buffet every day, weight gain will become evident. That may not be good for the producer, but for the cow, provided she does not get too fat, she adds the weight she needs for winter, allowing for ample calf growth during the third trimester and stabilizing body condition to milk and rebreed the following spring.

If feed is not plentiful, sort the cows and take feed away from the well-conditioned cows and give it to thin cows. By sorting the cows, the thin cows should respond with increased conditioning, thus being better prepared for winter and next year's calving without competing with the well-conditioned cows within the herd.

However, sorting often is time-consuming, and given the acreage of crop fields, generally the space is adequate to simply allow all the cows to enjoy fall grazing.

As fall slowly transcends into winter, a visit with the local nutritionist always is advisable. A couple of pounds of a good protein supplement will enhance digestion and usability of low-quality forages the cows are grazing.

Cow size is another discussion point, and fall is an excellent opportunity to evaluate the condition of the various sizes of cow within the herd, taking note of how individual cows have adapted to the local environment of the production unit.

There are big cows, and medium cows and smaller cows. There are cows that prefer to eat at bunks and cows that would rather walk a mile for lunch. There are cows that could fill a milk bucket in the fall and those that gave up milking and introduced their calf to outside feed by late summer. All these cow types exist in herds across the area, given that a lot of cows are not selected for

specific traits that lower cost but rather specific traits that increase production.

This certainly is something to think about as the winter feed bills start to show up. Is the increased production actually showing up as cash in the bank? If not, more questions need to be discussed.

Furthermore, the information that is known regarding cow efficiency relative to decreasing feed costs is not readily implemented in many cowherds. So for the average herd and typical producer, why not use body condition to acknowledge those cows that indicate the need for more inputs?

Simply put, if a cow cannot maintain condition during the summer and seems to be waiting for a bushel basket of supplement to regain weight, maybe she needs to find her way farther down the trail. If the time comes when input cost is more than desired, look to sell those apparently higher-maintenance cows as an effort to lower total feed costs.

In closing, now is the time to add condition to thin cows. Thin cows only will be thinner in the spring and will not compete. Don't wait; put condition on now when the time is right and dollars smaller.

May you find all your ear tags.

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

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