

## **BeefTalk 796: With Nice Weather, Cows Still Need a Balanced Supplement**

*Nice winters are not the time to skimp on cow nutrition.*

Nice weather always is appreciated, but it can create illusions that things are fine.

Lately, having traveled from eastern North Dakota to western Washington, I saw a lot of cows, normally obscured in the summertime, out grazing on crop aftermath or other paddocks that, in many winter seasons, are covered with snow.

Using crop aftermath and late-season dry forage can cut production costs; however, this can result in consequences. Cows need to receive a balanced ration to halt poor performance or even the loss of condition. Simply supplying copious amounts of dry, lower-quality forage will fill the cows up, but in the long haul, it will bring home some very big-bellied cows that, once the belly empties, will be thinner than they should be.

I have this very generic approach to ration balancing: If you do not have some mix of green and yellow in the ration, more than likely, the ration is unbalanced. Take a look. More green is not the problem, but more yellow and brown means this is the time to involve your local nutritionist.

As I drove by, the many cows and sometime cow-calf pairs were consuming yellow or brown feed, which left me a little uneasy. Historically, nice winters produce thinner cows with calves that are susceptible to health issues. In contrast, when winters are tougher, outside feed is needed, the nutritionist gets involved earlier and the cattle receive a well-balanced, appropriately prepared ration.

Gaining weight is extremely difficult for a cow once she enters the last third of gestation. So, when is the last third of gestation? If the bull went out May 1, Nov. 9 started the last third of gestation; if the bull went out June 1, Dec. 12 started the last third of gestation; if the bull went out on July 1, Jan. 11 started the last third of gestation; if the bull went out on Aug. 1, Feb. 12 started the last third of gestation; and if the bull went out Sept. 1, March 12 started the last third of gestation.

These are critical dates in the production cycle. Producers need to adjust or supplement available feed to meet the cows' changing nutritional requirements. Waiting to add condition to a thin cow can be a losing battle.

The cow advances daily in fetal growth demands, and the third trimester arrives with the need to eat to support the accelerated growth of the calf. And, when winter weather does arrive, more thermal output is needed to survive. The cow needs the daily feed intake to keep the calf growing and stoking her internal furnace.

As soon as she calves, all hands on deck. Milk production turns her into a perpetual milking machine. Feed in, milk out. So, nice winters can lull producers into not paying attention. The opportunity to get the cows in shape and keep the cows in shape can slip by.

Last-trimester nonlactating cows should be consuming approximately 8 percent crude protein feed. In many cases, if one was to gather a sample of the forage available for consumption, one would be hard-pressed to get 6 percent crude protein back in the feed analysis. Sometimes it's even lower. The feed may be available in copious amounts, but the quality is lacking. Thus, you have the vicious internal

cycle of trying to cope with the numerous nutrients that are lacking and how that affects the cow, and the calf as well.

Don't forget, the cow has to go through parturition and then provide adequate colostrum at birth. This is a big expectation. This is not the time to force a cow to pick and choose what parts of the body get the needed nutrients and those that don't, resulting in increased calving difficulty, and newborn calves that lack vigor and are more prone to illness.



A couple of pounds of a good balanced supplement or commercial cake can pay dividends. Check with your local nutritionist now.

A final reminder: The cows will enjoy the nice winter grazing; however, if the many extenuating circumstances affecting the cows' nutrition are not accounted for, the cows will not enjoy calving. Those cows that were not able to rebuild stamina, add some condition and muscle for her own well-being, and grow the developing calf late in pregnancy are a result of a lack of available good nutrition.

So do not skimp, skimp and skimp in hopes of saving a few dollars. Rather, provide the proper supplementation to meet the current needs of the cow herd.

A good discussion often comes about this time of year with this question: Do the cows fit the environment? And if the answer is no, then seek out some new genetics through time. If the answer is yes, seek to maintain those genetics.

But either way, as a producer, enjoy the nice weather, but supplement all cows according to the needs of the cow.

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.