

BeefTalk: The Concern is a Dwindling Hay Pile

Producers need to calculate their hay inventory, determine the pounds of cattle and other livestock to be fed, and plan accordingly.

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This time of year, most beef producers have an eye on the hay pile, knowing pasture turnout is still several weeks away.

As they scan the cow herd and count bales, they know the hay pile has to match the herd's daily feed intake, and several weeks of winter feeding still are left. A country drive will note the status of the hay pile, and to be honest, this year's hay piles are noticeably dwindling.

Generally, following a good forage year, producers have those hay piles that are fed out of and those that are set aside as carryover for next year. But they won't have much, if any, carryover this year, and copious hay is not found close to many cow herds.

Obviously, the attention to the hay pile is increased this year because of the memories of the limited forage harvest last summer. The drive for me is relatively short because those of us at the Dickinson Research Extension Center also are eying the hay pile. The hay bales are easy to count because the numbers are getting low.

The center's livestock inventory includes 228 calves born in 2017, 247 cows, nine bulls, four long yearlings, one spayed cow, 116 sheep and nine horses. On a good note, the 86 bred heifers have been at a feedlot, but they to need to come home by the end of March to prep for calving starting in May.

What does all that inventory mean? It means the center has a lot of breathing, living livestock that are solely our responsibility, something we take very seriously. This responsibility is a daily obligation to provide shelter and feed, something farmers and ranchers understand well.

But what does that mean in terms of feed? First, let's calculate just how much living mass the center must feed. Using the body weights that the center knows and estimating the body weight on the rest, the center has 542,000 pounds (271 tons) of living body weight that must be fed every day. We usually do not think of the livestock that way, but we must know the total weight to calculate the center's feed needs.

The 271 tons of livestock are going to require 2.5 percent of their living body weight in daily feed intake, or 13,550 pounds of feed from now until the end of April. May 1 is the target for turnout on spring grass for the center.

So let's figure our feed needs. If the bales' average weight is 1,300 pounds (bale weight will vary, and I estimated on the light side), the center needs about 11 bales every day (rounding up 13,550 pounds divided by 1,300 pounds), or 539 bales for the next seven weeks (49 days).

The current center hay inventory is 97 bales, with contacts made to deliver 350 bales. The current inventory and purchased hay bales total 447 bales, leaving the center 92 bales, or three-plus standard truckloads of hay, shy of what it needs.

But we are close and we are offsetting the hay shortage as follows: The calves receive 4 pounds daily of a commercial 15 percent protein supplement (44,688 pounds for 49 days) and the cows receive an average of 6 pounds daily of a 22 percent protein supplement alfalfa plus 30 percent pea cake (72,618 pounds for 49 days). This is a savings of 90 bales.

The center contracted for an alfalfa plus 30 percent pea cake early to help ensure adequate feed when the growing season comes up short. The cake was a good investment this winter.

Additionally, the center shops for and purchases hay of good quality with well-prepared bales that ship well and, in reality, average around 1,700 pounds.

The center will make it. This past winter could have been much worse. Memories of prior winter feedings from November through April (roughly 180 days) are vivid. If the center had to feed harvested feed for those six months, the center would need 2,439,000 pounds, 1,220 tons or 1,876 big round bales that average 1,300 pounds; that's 63 trucks of 30 bales per load. That is a lot of feed.

If that were the case, the center would be looking for more than 20 loads of additional hay. However, the center sold half the cow herd in anticipation of a low hay inventory and sent all the bred heifers to the feedlot to be custom fed.

In addition, the move to May calving has been a lifesaver. If the cows were calving in March/April, the daily feed intake could go up another 35 to 40 percent, or another 90 bales or three truckloads of hay, to meet the demands of lactation and motherhood.

But as the winter season comes to an end, adequate feed will be laid in with the anticipation of upcoming spring rain and an optimistic growing season. That is all we can do.

Remember, the glance at the hay pile is more than a glance. The glance at the cows is more than a quick look. Producers need to pull the pencil out, calculate the hay inventory, determine the pounds of cattle and other livestock to be fed, and plan accordingly.

The nice winter was a plus. Every three days that the center does not have to deliver harvested feed spares one truckload of hay.

But you don't cheat Mother Nature. Plan on enough hay to get to pasture turnout in May. Early turnout is not an option. Cows need to be cared for, but that dry grass from last year needs care as well.

May you find all your ear tags.

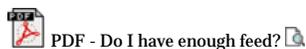
For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu.

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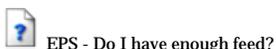
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