



## BeefTalk 642: A Bucket of Alfalfa Cubes Has Value

### SUPPORTING MATERIALS

**⚕ Prescription**

*Feed 5 60-pound  
Alfalfa Square Bales  
per 50 cows*

**Just What the Doctor Ordered**

*The bottom line is that producers should feed some alfalfa.*

The final cattle were ultrasounded for pregnancy at the Dickinson Research Extension Center. These were replacement heifers that still are on grass.

The heifers have been foraging all summer and fall with the bulls turned in on Aug. 1. The pregnancy checks were routine and uneventful, and the heifers handled their reacquaintance with their caregivers well.

Of the 47 replacement heifers, two were open. However, seven additional heifers were culled as late-calving because the center restricted calving to 42 days or two cycles. The goal is to be done calving by June 15.



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As far as the heifers go, we have a 96 percent pregnancy rate, but only 85 percent are predicted to calve by June 15. Some would say feelings have limited value when culling cows or replacement heifers. However, there always is that gut twinge when sending a well-grown, well-haired heifer to market. Reality would say that if a heifer calves late, she always will be late, so keep back a few extra heifer calves and plan to market those that do not breed on time.

Even though some of the center's heifers failed, the long-term benchmarks developed by the NDSU Extension Service through the CHAPS program using North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement producers' cattle numbers would suggest that 85.8 percent of the replacement heifers should calve within 42 days of the start of the calving season. This means that the center's heifers were right at what would be expected.

Snow is on the ground and the days these heifers can graze is coming to a close. Likewise, the cows at the center are making the rounds on corn stock or cover crops, or are getting hay. The need to supplement or provide a complete ration soon will be the norm for much of cow country.

Speaking of supplementation, I noted previously that these heifers adapted well to being worked and were very tame. That's because the ranch crew has been supplementing the heifers twice a week with 1.5 pounds of alfalfa cubes per head. The first and most obvious outcome of this feeding regime was the taming of the heifers.



As the center has put younger cattle on grass and kept them there for longer periods, one of the negative effects has been skittish or temperamental heifers. The alfalfa cubes certainly have changed that because now these cattle are very easy to handle.

On a broader note, cows need feed. If production is to be maintained during the coming winter months, alfalfa is one of those great feeds that certainly go a long way in helping a cow meet her nutritional requirements. In a roundabout way, the well-being of the cattle comes down to having a mix of roughages available.

The summer generally is abundant with green grass and the winter dependent on preserved green grass. 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 out of the ration.

More and more feed is delivered, but it is brownish, which is the color of mature, older forage. The color also can be gold, which is the color of straw and many of the grain products that are supplemented to cattle.

All the rations need to be balanced and can be fed, provided the correct supplements are added under the advice of a good nutritionist. These rations will work. However, if push comes to shove and a producer gives the cows more low-quality feed, there is a very real possibility of some detrimental effects on late-pregnant or early lactating cows.

A semi load of alfalfa certainly may be what the doctor ordered. The bottom line is that producers should feed some alfalfa. Often, the price seems high, but one is not going to feed alfalfa to beef cows at an all-they-can-eat rate. Instead, just a few pounds of alfalfa a day really helps the cows. Five to 7 pounds of alfalfa would be a great starting point for any nutritionist to start calculating a ration.

Unfortunately, alfalfa is not always available. However, the feed dealer may have some alfalfa-based supplements or cubes that would help the cows. The simple point is that the world is better off with a mix of things and cows are as well. Having some variety helps cover up the things one feed may be lacking.

In the cow business, we tend to start feeding a stack of hay. Unlike the feedlot calf that gets a balanced ration every day, the cow may get stuck eating out of one haystack. If that stack is brown or gold with no evidence of well-preserved 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.

You might want to think twice and have some 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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