

Are Your Cows On a Weight-control Program?

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The early snowfall made headlines. For North Dakota beef producers, business was disrupted, but disruption is not a stranger to the world of beef producers. Tough days, unpredictable events and keeping in tune with the rest of the world are standard operating procedures for those involved in the process of producing beef.

What unusual weather does do is serve as a good reminder that the seasons are changing and a shift in management is in order. Historically, cattle seem to run the grasslands until Mother Nature says enough is enough. In fact, in mild winters some cattle may be seen wandering summer pastures well into January, seeking enough nutrition to get through another day.

Research by Lee Manske, Dickinson Research Extension Center range scientist, shows cattle that are maintained under a six-month grazing system really have harvested the year's production. As the cows, nursing calves, approach October, daily nutritional needs are not being met if the cows weight loss is indicative of nutritional deficiencies.

Weight loss in excess of 100 pounds per cow would not be surprising as cows are brought in to wean their calves in the middle of November. Given the downward trend in cow weight and condition in normal years, this year's weather, such as the early winter snowfall, does cover up a lot of what is available to eat. The end result is a rapid acceleration of weight loss for the cow. The sensible option is alternative nutrition.

Occasional warm weather may be on the way, but for those tough weather days, the cows and calves simply rely on energy stored in their own system. This means the animals supplement what they eat by breaking down stored fat. Over a short time, this is simply nature's way of providing energy on which the animals live.

Over the long haul, however, daily nutritional needs must be met or the cow and/or calf simply will start to lose weight. As forage quality declines, the vast majority of cows are already in a state of nutritional

decline. Overlooking what may seem like a short-term nutritional glitch can escalate into a major managerial mistake by midwinter.

A very common mistake within the beef business is to let body conditions slip on the cowherd in the early fall and realize too late in the season that the cows could use some more flesh over their ribs. The result is a rush of supplemental nutrition prior to calving, during calving and during breeding, all times in the life of a cow that weight gain is much harder to achieve.

The North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association's CHAPS records show the five-year rolling average for typical cows around weaning time in the fall is 1,378 pounds, with a body condition score of 5-plus. A quick check of the 1996 "NRC of Beef Cattle" guide suggests a 1,400-pound dry cow needs to eat 26 pounds of dry matter daily to maintain her weight, provided the diet has 0.8 megacalorie per pound of metabolizable energy (48.8 percent total digestible nutrients) and 6.9 percent total protein.

Depending on the moisture level of the forage, the cow needs to consume 32.5 pounds at 80 percent dry matter forage and up to 52 pounds if the forage is 50 percent dry matter.

Are your cows getting enough to eat? In a month's time, a cow needs to graze off almost 800 pounds of actual dry matter. If each acre of land already has been grazed for the summer and nothing is growing, the cow has only one option, lose weight.

Again, are your cows getting enough to eat? Odds are they are not.

May you find all your NAIS-approved ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0269.

Typical Fall Cow Body and Nutrient Requirements

Body Weight and Condition Score for ND Beef Cattle Improvement Association CHAPS Producers

Cow body weight	1,378 pounds
Cow body condition score	5.4

averages based on a five year rolling average

Selected Nutrient Requirements of a 1400 Pound Dry Cow

Daily dry matter intake	26 pounds
Metabolizable energy	0.8 Mcal per pound
Percent TDN	48.8
Percent total protein	6.9

based on the 1996 Nutrient Requirements of Beef Cattle