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BeefTalk: The Arrival of Winter Means More Cow Feed

Don't negate the gains in cow body condition resulting from a nice fall.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

An extended fall grazing season may cause producers to get too comfortable and subsequently delay the beginning of winter feeding.

This is a management mistake and can negate the benefits gained in cow body condition as a result of a nice fall. Cattle have daily nutrient needs. Shifts in weather must be met with the appropriate nutritional changes (feed). Time is long for cattle to gain body

Images

A Common Mistake is Reducing the Feed a Little as the Weather Warms

Beef Cattle Nutrient Requirements

Cow Weight	Estimated Dry Matter Intake
(Pounds)	(Pounds per Day)
1,000	26.5
1,100	28.2
1,200	29.9
1,300	31.5
1,400	33.1
1,500	34.7
1,600	36.2
1,700	37.8
1,800	39.3
1,900	40.7
2,000	42.2

Assumptions: Dry Matter feed required at 5 degrees and no mud, 17.6 lbs peak milk during lactation, last two-thirds of pregnancy and 55% TDN forage.

Source: Greg Lardy, Animal Science Department Head at North Dakota State University. Based on the 1996 NRC Beef Cattle Nutrient Requirements Table Generator.

A Common Mistake is Reducing the Feed a Little as the Weather Warms

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condition but very short for them to lose body condition.

The fall has treated the Dickinson Research Extension Center cows well. The good fall weather has been widespread. I am having a hard time remembering so many cattle grazing crop aftermath or other designated fall opportunity grazing while enjoying a very unseasonably warm and dry fall.

I use the word "opportunity" because weather sometimes quickly limits fall grazing opportunities. This limitation generally arrives with the first wet, cold, slushy weather; however, for some, the opportunity simply gradually dissipates with the final digestible bites of available fall forage.

Either way, as winter conditions settle in, delaying a proper increase in feed intake for cattle can trigger two things. First, the cattle struggle for adequate intake because of general deterioration of the standing fall forage. Cows trampling and wasting the forage that is available compounds the problem, and cattle simply do not get enough to eat.

Second, as cows enter their third trimester of pregnancy, the nutritional requirements of the cow and the developing calf are greater. The cow responds by drawing down on body fat, expressed as body condition.

This is absolutely not what the cow should do.

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Effective grazing of fall forage is intended to produce a better-conditioned cow at calving. Good condition is key for an uneventful parturition, copious colostrum for the newborn and a boost to start the cow's reproductive cycle early while nursing an active, fast-growing calf.

That is the summation and rewards of excellent fall and winter cow management. Do not waste all those good things by delaying a shift in feeding as the weather shifts.

This is also a good point to ponder the appropriate time for calving. Calving later offers more seasonal flexibility before the cow's nutritional requirements go up, but for all practical purposes, many, many producers already will have cows in the third trimester in December.

Do not procrastinate until after the holidays. Find a nutritionist and prepare a balanced ration now to keep the condition on the cows. The quantity and quality of feed should not be allowed to run low, so adequate feed intake and supplementation are key.

To calculate feed needs, the nutritionist is going to ask several questions: How much do the cows weigh and milk? How is the environment affecting the feed requirements of the cattle? What stage of production are the cattle in? And what do you have to feed? The correct answers are critical because the resulting feed ration will sustain the

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cow and grow the calf in utero throughout the winter.

The ration does not need to be complicated, just correct.

Let's take the first question: "How big are the cows?" Cattle intake is dependent on size and is the first step to better feed delivery and management. Greg Lardy, North Dakota State University Animal Sciences Department head and professor, shared calculations that help show the amount of feed a cow would need at a given environment (5-degree Fahrenheit temps, no mud), a given milk production (17.6 pounds peak milk during lactation), a given stage of production (a cow in the last two-thirds of pregnancy) and given feed resource (55 percent total digestible nutrients forage).

He calculated the dry-matter intake for every 200 pounds of cow from a 1,000-pound cow to a cow that weighs 2,000 pounds. Given his assumptions, the 1,000-pound cow needs 26.5 pounds of dry-matter forage daily, the 1,200-pound cow needs 29.9, the 1,400-pound cow needs 33.1, the 1,600-pound cow needs 36.2, the 1,800-pound cow 39.3 and the 2,000-pound cow needs 42.2.

Understanding this first step is critical because poorly conditioned cows are, many times, simply underfed. But remember, other factors, not just cow weight, influence the daily forage needs for a

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cow. Now is not the time to misjudge cow nutrition.

When visiting with the nutritionist, make sure you adjust your feeding for your environment, your cow size, expected milk production and your calving time. Remember the management objective: Keep body condition on the cows. Body condition is the primary indicator of the nutritional status of the cow.

Any change should be monitored because subsequent effects on reproduction and overall health are on the way. In other words, feed now or pay later.

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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Attachments

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