

Coffee with Agriculture

By: Devan Leo

NDSU Extension Agent

McKenzie County

Date: November 18, 2020

Feed 'em and Reap

This year has been less than desirable kind of like last year. The biggest difference is last year we had an excess of water and this year we had hardly any. The eastern part of the state got the moisture we so desperately yearned for. Across the western part of the state, pastures for cattle are in a sorry state and if forage wasn't stockpiled or some pastures weren't saved for grazing, then some livestock is in a hurting way currently.

It's hard to fathom having to feed this early in the year. That being said, it is essential to get feed in front of cows now. The advantage to feeding this time of year is to get rid of all that two and three year old hay you've been 'saving' but never actually planned to use. It's sitting in stacks, turning gray and deteriorating from the elements. The other advantage is cattle do not require much high quality feed this time of year. They are in a maintenance pattern right now, meaning they can get by on 7 or 8% hay quality. Roll out some of those old bales sitting in stack and roll out a few extra than you normally would. Allow the cattle to freely graze through it rather than expecting them to slick it all up. By allowing them to be a little bit choosy, they will pick what is better for them and trample the rest into the ground returning carbon and other nutrients back into the soil.

Some supplementation with lower quality feeds will be required. They will need some mineral or something of the like, to help with the rumen activity and gut motility. Lower quality feed requires a little more effort to digest when concentrations are low. However, you may consider testing your old hay and seeing what its values are. It may surprise you to find that the inner $\frac{3}{4}$ of your bales are still fairly high in protein and other nutrients. Allowing an almost ad lib diet, will improve the body condition of your cattle with little effort.

It is important to evaluate the body condition score (BCS) of our livestock before getting into the thick of winter. If our cattle are at a BCS 4 (hooks and or pins visible, back two ribs visible) then we need to bump that cow up to a 5.5 or a 6 BCS before cold weather really sets in. Many are concerned that if their cows get too fat during pregnancy that the calves will be huge. This thought process has been debunked by science. There was a research study done on a group of cows where those kept in a lower BCS throughout their pregnancy had higher percentages of calf loss and listless calves at birth. Those cows kept in higher range BCS (5-6) didn't necessarily have larger calves, but more vibrant calves that were up and looking to suckle within minutes of birth.

It is much easier to put body weight on cattle now than it is close to calving. Each body score increase (say from a 4 to a 5) requires somewhere between 80 to 180 pounds of gain, depending on the size of your cattle. If a person waits until January to start remedying low BCS, it could cost an exorbitant amount of money with little in return. If your calving starts in March and January your cows are thin and rough coated, you only get two months to amend the problem. It takes 14 days to adjust a rumen environment to a new diet program (especially if it includes grain where it didn't before). From there, you would have to increase high quality feeds daily to get the gain needed to be healthy enough for calving.

Let's get ahead of the rolling ball and get some of that old hay used up and our cows in top shape before winter! I am here to help with any questions or concerns so please don't hesitate to call the Extension office at 701-444-3451.