

Is Hay Still the Best Choice to Winter Cows?



The feed cost environment for 2013-14 is dramatically different compared to last year, according to Warren Rusche, South Dakota State University (SDSU) Extension cow-calf field specialist.

“Corn and corn-derived feeds such as distillers’ grains and silage are only about half the cost of one year ago. Hay and roughage costs are lower, as well, but on a percentage basis, the price decline has not been as dramatic as compared to corn prices,” Rusche says.

With this information in mind, Rusche adds there may be an opportunity to exploit these differences in feed prices to reduce winter feed expenses.

In Table 1 are three different rations for 1,400-lb. cows in late gestation. The rations were formulated to meet protein requirements and at

Table 1: Late gestation diets of a 1,400-lb. cow maintaining body condition, lb. per head per day (as fed basis).

Feedstuff	Price	Ration #1	Ration #2	Ration #3
Corn grain	\$3.70/bushel			10
Alfalfa hay	\$150/ton	4		
Grass hay	\$90/ton	25		
Corn silage	\$40/ton		16	
Corn stalks	\$65/ton		22	
Modified distillers	\$90/ton		5	
Feed cost per day		\$1.43	\$1.26	\$1.29

Source: South Dakota State University Extension

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least maintain body condition. Ration No. 1 is a traditional hay-based diet using alfalfa hay (19% crude protein) and grass hay (8% crude protein). Ration No. 2 consists of corn silage, corn stalks and modified distillers’ grains. Ration No. 3 is a limit-fed diet using 10 lb. of hay (alfalfa and grass) combined with 10 lb. of corn per head per day. The prices are based on published price data from South Dakota feed markets in late November.

“Using these prices, diets utilizing corn or corn-derived feeds are more cost effective compared to diets relying completely on hay,” Rusche says.

Of course, he adds, every situation is different, and hay costs in some markets may not be as high as the values used here.

“It should be noted that the corn price is for dry corn. In some cases there may be an opportunity to utilize wetter corn that would otherwise be

subject to discounts and reduce costs further,” he says.

Implementing some of these strategies requires limiting the cows’ feed intake below what their appetites would be normally. In order to do that successfully, Rusche says the following management factors need to be considered:

- Diets should be based on actual nutrient analyses.
- Cattle should be gradually adapted to diet changes, especially if high-starch feeds are used.
- Proper bunk management is extremely important to avoid digestive upsets.
- Plenty of room at the bunk and in the lot should be allowed (at least 30 inches of bunk space and 500 square feet per cow).
- Limit-fed rations will meet the cows’ nutrient needs but won’t satisfy their appetites. Strong fences are essential.
- Just like under more traditional management systems, body condition needs to be monitored to make sure that the cattle are on track to meet production goals.

For a more in-depth discussion of limit-feeding cows, visit iGrow.org and read “Limit Feeding Strategies for Beef Cows,” or contact Rusche at warren.rusche@sdstate.edu or 605-882-5140. **HW**