



Ways to Cut Winter Feed Costs

Idaho rancher and writer shares tips to reduce winter feed costs.

by Heather Smith Thomas

The largest expense in managing a cow is usually winter feed cost. If you put up hay, one aspect of analyzing costs is to look closely at haying methods, equipment, labor and fuel and consider all options. For many producers, winter feed is an expense that can be reduced by letting cows harvest more of their own feed (finding ways to extend fall and winter grazing) or changing to a more efficient and economical haying system.

Another option when producing hay is to sell high-value hay and replace it with lower-cost feed. Many producers don't consider the market value of their high-quality forages and only look at costs of production. In years when good alfalfa hay can be sold for \$80-100 per ton, many ranchers would be further ahead to sell that hay (or part of it, keeping only enough for young animals in the herd that need the extra protein) and use lower-quality roughage for the main cow herd.

You can save on feed costs while still providing adequate nutrition if you feed wisely. Many herds could reduce feed costs 25-50% while improving nutrition

at the same time. An eight-year summary of the Iowa State University Beef Cow Business Record System showed a spread of \$121 between the high-profit third of producers and the low-profit third — \$301.60 annual cow cost versus \$423. Annual feed costs accounted for \$50 of that difference. Yet the high-profit group, who spent less on feed, produced 98 more pounds of calf per cow and had a 2.8% higher calf crop. Spending more on feed doesn't necessarily mean you are providing cows with better nutrition.

Deseret Land and Cattle Co., for example, was able to reduce total feed cost per cow from \$381 in 1979 to \$197 by 1989. During those 10 years, it accomplished this with more efficient use of available forage, focusing on a greater reliance on grazing. It reduced dependency on harvested forage yet increased its actual beef production. Most stockmen who increase profits are ones who find ways to reduce the harvested feeds used. There are many ways to do this, which include using crop residues, utilizing cool-season forages that can be grazed earlier in the spring (getting cows off

hay sooner) and saving certain pastures for late-fall or early-winter grazing.

In areas where crop residues are available, they are the cheapest feed. One crop residue rarely used to full advantage is wheat straw. With proper supplementation, it can make up much of the diet, especially for dry cows before calving. And by ammoniating wheat straw, the nutrient quality can be improved to equal or exceed that of prairie hay.

A way to reduce use of hay in spring is to use cool-season plants such as wheat pasture, brome or fescue. Wheat pastures offer great potential because of their early growth and high productivity. In range areas, plantings of crested wheat can allow early spring grazing well ahead of the native range plants.

Feed nutrients as needed

When buying feeds, compare prices not by volume or weight alone but also by nutrient content. The money spent to test a hay sample is often a good investment, enabling you to match feed sources to cattle needs and to avoid having serious shortfalls in nutrition or wasting expensive nutrients on cows that don't need them. Test feeds for protein levels. You can't minimize costs on protein supplements (while still meeting needs of cows) without knowing the level of protein in your hay or pasture. If you know the protein levels, you can figure out how much or how little additional protein you need to provide.

If you are using winter pastures, alfalfa hay can be a reasonable protein supplement compared to supplements like cottonseed or soybean meal. In most years alfalfa is cheaper than other protein supplements. Even good grass hay will provide adequate protein for dry cows on marginal winter pastures. The important thing is to use the resources you have at hand. If the equipment and labor are available or hay is nearby at a reasonable price, feeding hay may be the cheapest alternative. But when hay has to be hauled a long way — increasing its cost — another type of supplement may be cheaper.

Energy is the most expensive and most important part of diet. Protein, minerals and vitamins are wasted unless the cow's energy requirements are met first. Roughage is always the most economical source of energy, especially if you let cows do as much of the harvesting as possible (pastures, cornstalks, etc.). To get the most from pastures, rotate grazing, divide the herd into groups according to their needs, save the best pastures for those that need it most — yearlings or first-calf heifers. You can also use supplemental protein (alfalfa hay or other sources) on rough feeds or poor pastures to increase digestibility and intake.

But protein supplementation can drastically increase winter feed costs if supplementation is not managed properly. Dry pregnant cows don't need it unless they are on very low-quality forage.

You must consider the needs of cows. Energy and protein requirements vary greatly, depending on stage of pregnancy and lactation. A cow in late gestation needs about 1.5 lb. of crude protein whereas a lactating cow needs at least 2.25 lb.

The important thing to remember when reducing costs is to not reduce the overall productivity of your operation. Do not shortchange cows on basic nutrition. The two most critical periods in the cow's year are the 30-50 days just before she calves and the 80-100 days after calving until she is rebred. The best time to cut feed costs is after weaning, when she has lowest requirements and can utilize poorer-quality roughages, crop residues and byproducts. At this time, you can find numerous ways to reduce her feed bill.

Cows should not be left on marginal fall or winter pastures while still nursing calves, or they will lose too much body condition. One Extension research project showed that cows on unsupplemented pasture that continued nursing calves until December lost about 150 lb. and 1.5 points in body condition score by the next calving. If calves are left on cows this late, pasture must be supplemented with adequate energy and protein to keep cows from losing weight.

But this management practice costs money and is counterproductive. Keeping calves on cows longer may look advantageous for weaning weights, but when cows are pulled down to calve at a body condition score of 4 or less, next year's calf crop percentage is lowered (more weak or sick calves, greater chance for loss) and replacement costs increase since more cows are open the next year.

Reduce waste

Often minimizing waste can reduce feed costs. In some situations, cows can be fed once a day or every other day, but in many instances they waste hay by bedding on it or tromping it into the mud. Feeding smaller amounts more often not only wastes less hay but also enables younger cattle or slower eaters to get more chance at their share.

Hay can be fed on well-sodded pasture without much waste, but if the ground is muddy, you need to use feeders, especially when feeding alfalfa, so cattle can clean up all the hay instead of tromping it into the ground. Since about 75% of the nutrients in alfalfa are in the leaves, much of the value of alfalfa is lost when feeding on the ground. **HW**