



Rethinking Winter Feeding Strategies

Considerations for trimming the feed bill in a new era of volatile prices.

by Kindra Gordon

It's a commonly noted fact that feed cost is the highest variable cost for most cow-calf operations. So how might you save some dollars and make better sense of feeding strategies for your cow herd?

Aaron Stalker, an assistant professor of ruminant nutrition at the University of Nebraska's West Central Research and Extension Center in North Platte, suggests it's a matter of rethinking your traditional feeding strategies and looking for suitable alternatives.

Here are some options to consider:

Re-evaluate calving date

"In my opinion one of the most common mistakes is that people try to change the forage nutrient supply to meet the cow's needs.

I suggest doing it the other way around — matching the cow's needs to available forage nutrients — is more profitable," Stalker says.

Specifically, Stalker says a change in calving date to better match forage resources can be a cost-effective option. He reports that research at the Gudmundson Sandhills Laboratory — which is operated as a working ranch — has resulted in data comparing June and March calving herds for several years, and the June herd is more profitable than the March herd.

"The reason is because the June calving herd has lower costs, not necessarily higher revenue," Stalker explains. He says this change is a prime example of how matching forage resources to the cow's nutrient needs can help reduce feed costs.

Stalker adds that more

producers seem to recognize this advantage and, at least in Nebraska, they are starting to see a shift toward more summer and fall calving. He cites a survey conducted in 1992 of producers in western and central Nebraska to monitor what season ranch operations calve in, and when a follow-up survey was conducted in 2002, an increasing number of summer and fall calving dates were revealed.

Stalker recognizes that for some operations a change to summer calving may not be an option if they have farm ground and field work that takes the bulk of their labor supply during the summer. But for those ranchers who calve in the spring simply because of tradition, he suggests moving calving dates might be worth giving a second thought.

And, to those operations that plan to continue with a spring calving herd, Stalker suggests looking for ways to extend grazing options as much as possible through stockpiled forages or crop residues.

He tells that the Gudmundson lab has conducted research and has found that extending winter grazing of a March-calving herd can help reduce the amount of hay fed compared to traditional feeding. "Whenever a producer can extend grazing of winter range, feed costs can be decreased," Stalker says. In addition, a June calving herd utilizes significantly less stored feed.

Be supplement savvy

Stalker says when it comes to evaluating supplements, there can be several surprises that challenge traditional thinking, as well. First, he says research conducted at Gudmundson with the March calving herd is indicating that supplements need to be fed — but not for the reason you would think.

He explains that traditionally supplements are thought to be fed to enhance rebreeding success of the cow, but Stalker says, "We've found we need to feed supplements to March calving cows to increase the performance of their offspring — that's a paradigm shift."

Stalker says the research showed that rebreeding success on cows was sufficient without

supplementation, but it was their offspring who did not perform as well if no supplementation was fed. "The steer calves were lighter and the heifer calves were not as fertile, resulting in lower conception rates as they matured to breeding age," Stalker reports.

For this research at Gudmundson, a distillers' grain-based range cake was used in the study as the supplement, which supplied both protein and energy.

As producers evaluate supplement options, Stalker advises looking at different types of feedstuffs. He says, "I think producers get caught up in feeding a certain type of supplement."

As an example, he says some producers tend to always feed alfalfa as a protein source. "The type of feed is not as important as meeting the cow's nutrient needs. A cow needs protein — it does not necessarily have to be from alfalfa," Stalker explains.

Instead, he says, "Look for a feed source that offers the least expensive source of supplemental protein — and purchase and delivery cost changes from year to year."

This means producers need to do their homework. To help calculate feedstuff options, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers a free "feed cost calculator" online at www.agmanagerstools.com.

Stalker explains that this calculator allows for inputting purchase and delivery costs on up to 10 feedstuffs to determine which offers the least expensive supplement on a per unit supplement basis.

He emphasizes that in order to compare feeds accurately, it is essential to compare prices on a per unit supplement basis.

As a final tip, Stalker also suggests soliciting bids for your feeds. He says, "I know producers who have saved \$30 to \$40 per ton on the exact same feedstuff by calling more than one feed supplier. So a person can really save money by making some calls."

In total, Stalker reiterates that the bottom line with regard to managing feed costs is to understand the cow's nutritional requirements throughout the year and then match available forage and feed to that. **HW**

Additional advice

University of Nebraska ruminant nutritionist Aaron Stalker says an additional cost-saving tip with regard to feedstuffs is to look for regional availability on special co-products.

As an example, in Nebraska wet distillers' grains are proving to be an effective supplement. At the Gudmundson research facility, the wet distillers are being fed on the ground to cows on winter range. "We are finding that the wet distillers can be quite a bit more economical to feed than cake," Stalker says.

Analyzing forages for nutrient content can also be a tool to help create a "least-cost ration" for cows, suggests Jason Ahola, an Extension beef specialist who recently joined the Colorado State University faculty and was formerly at the University of Idaho. However, Ahola says less than 10% of cow-calf producers analyze their forages for nutrient content,

based on U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) survey data. And, only about one-quarter of those producers actually develop a least-cost ration. As a result, many U.S. beef cows are receiving excess nutrients and/or a ration that is not least-cost, Ahola says.

He suggests producers tap into a free and easy-to-use computer ration balancing program such as the tools available from University of Nebraska-Lincoln www.agmanagerstools.com or from Oklahoma State University's "COWculator." The software and directions are available at www.ansi.okstate.edu/exten/cowculator/.

Development and use of a simple ration enables animal requirements to be met while ensuring optimum performance, Ahola says. But, more importantly, it can reduce feed costs by avoiding overfeeding — especially protein, which is costly, he concludes. **HW**