

Will the Hay Inventory Feed the Cows?

by **Kris Ringwall**

Provide the proper supplementation to meet the current needs of the cow herd or reduce inventory.

Cow herd inventory is a working asset for beef producers, and maintaining that inventory is an important component of a successful beef operation. The challenge is keeping feed resources current to provide the daily feed needs.

At the Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC), 229 calves are anticipated to consume 378 tons of forage before spring grass. At 1,300 lb. per bale, 582 bales of forage will be fed before turnout on May 1. The question is “How much hay should the calves get before the call is made to sell some calves to spare forage for the cow herd?”

The numbers

The calves receive 4 lb. daily of a commercial supplement to balance the forage-based ration and to make for better utilization of the forage. That saves 82 tons of hay for the cow herd. The center summered 262 cows with an average fall weight of 1,369 lb. or a total cow weight of 358,746 lb. The average condition score was 6.3.

The drought cut into feed supplies, so the center sold 117 older cows totaling an average weight of 1,482 lb. That meant 145 younger cows were kept that averaged 1,278 lb. The three-year-old cows averaged 1,341 lb., while the two-year-old cows average 1,202 lb. That extra year of life for the three-year-old cow added 139 lb. to her body weight, or in terms of feed, almost half a big round hay bale per cow for a typical winter.

From that perspective, selling older cows removes more weight than selling the younger cows. The average weight for the older cows was more, thus selling older cows removed more total weight, which translates into feed savings.

Of the 117 cows sold, 75 were traditional-bred cows averaging 1,580 lb., while the 42 Aberdeen-influenced cows averaged 1,308 lb. The 272-lb. body weight difference is interesting because the difference between the standard-size and Aberdeen-influenced cows is almost an additional large round bale per cow for a typical winter.

The current center cow inventory is 83 standard beef cows and 62 Aberdeen-influenced cows. The anticipated forage need is 2 to 2.5% of 185,316 lb. of cumulative body weight per day, or about 4,633 lb. of forage daily.

Looking ahead

With the nice weather the area has received, the cows are grazing crop aftermath, with 4 lb. of 22% protein supplement cake fed every other day. If feeding begins at the beginning of the year for 120 days, the center needs 555,948 lb. of forage — 428 of the 1,300-lb. round bales. An additional 582 bales are needed for the calves, totaling 1,010 bales to overwinter.

Based on the calves' daily supplement, their bale consumption is offset by 126 bales. The cows' bale consumption is offset by the cake supplement by 27 bales. Either way, no carryover of hay will happen. More than likely, some hay will need to be purchased. Every day the cows stay on crop aftermath, the center benefits.

Keep in mind nice weather is always appreciated but can create illusions that things are fine.

Using crop aftermath and late-season dry forage can cut production costs; however, that can have consequences. Cows need to receive a balanced ration to halt poor performance or loss of condition. The cows will enjoy the nice winter grazing. However, if the many extenuating circumstances affecting the cows' nutrition are not accounted for, the cows will not enjoy calving. Cows must maintain condition prior to calving, and those that lack condition need to add it and grow the developing calf. Do not skimp, skimp and skimp in hopes of saving a few dollars. Rather, provide the proper supplementation to meet the current needs of the cow herd or reduce inventory. **HW**

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