



Management Tips to Help Cut Winter Feeding Costs

By Joe Snyder

Trying to reduce winter feed costs? There are several strategies to consider. Not all of these suggestions are possible for everyone, but turn them over and think about them. Winter feed cost is the largest expense on most ranches and those who can reduce it may enjoy better profits.

1. Begin the process of reducing winter feed costs by knowing what and how much your cows are consuming. This requires checking dry matters on all high moisture ingredients on a daily or at least weekly basis and adjusting rations accordingly. Producers cannot afford to be overfeeding forages and risk running out of inventory or overfeeding concentrates at today's prices.
2. Identify the nutrient content of available feeds to decide what supplements are needed. Contact your local Extension agent, feed company nutritionist or veterinarian if you need help in calculating the supplement(s) required in your feeding program. Keep in mind that proper body condition scores and growth rates of reproductive females must be maintained. Not meeting nutritional requirements of heifers and cows during the last third of pregnancy and the first 60 days of lactation may lead to significant economic loss.
3. Cull nonproductive animals a little closer. Consider selling open cows or cows with poor health, bad eyes, deformed udders, poor dispositions or bad feet.
4. Wean calves as early as possible. Feeding them directly is cheaper than feeding cows to maintain production, plus it enables cows to strengthen their condition before winter.
5. Retain the best quality feed for young stock and nursing cows after calving, because both milk production and growth demand extra nutrients.
6. Healthy cattle use feed more efficiently. De-worm and de-louse cattle to avoid losing cheap gains on pasture. Parasites can reduce cow performance and rob your cows of expensive supplemental feed. Cows will graze closer to the ground when forage is in short supply, which can increase the number of parasites ingested. Re-treat for lice in mid winter. Make sure vitamins A, D and E are adequate either through feed or injections every 60 days. Balance rations with enough calcium, phosphorus and trace minerals.

Winter feed cost is the largest expense on most ranches.

7. Extend the fall and spring grazing seasons in order to reduce hay harvesting and feeding costs.

8. Graze winter range or stockpile perennial forages for deferred grazing. Windrow forages for deferred grazing. Find more efficient ways of grazing crop residues.

9. Feed with ethanol byproducts, which are cheaper distillers' grains, especially if you live near an available supply.

10. Sell all or most of the high value hay you're producing and give your cattle lower cost feed.

11. Sometimes it isn't economical to feed cattle to meet all of their nutritional requirements throughout the year. Talk with your veterinarian about the possibility of offering better

nutrition while feeding less.

12. Protein supplements can increase low-quality forage digestibility and intake while extending the grazing season. Look for opportunities to buy alternative, cheaper sources of protein.

13. Compare prices of feed based on nutrient content as well as weight or volume.

14. If cattle are cold stressed, feed them later in the day; research suggests late afternoon feeding makes more heat available to them during and after digestion when they need it most.

15. Reduce waste by using a feeder as opposed to putting hay on the ground, and feeding smaller amounts more often.

16. Don't store round hay bales outside without protection.

17. Group cows by nutrient needs, such as production status (dry vs. lactating), age, and body condition. Grouping cows can avoid over or under feeding a particular group, which will reduce supplemental feed costs.

18. Send replacement heifers to a feedlot for development so you can divert their feed/hay to the cowherd; feedlots can sometimes grow your heifers cheaper than you can.

Sources: Cattle Today Online, The Ohio State University Extension, The Samuel Roberts Nobel Foundation, West Virginia University Extension, University of Georgia Extension