

Special Areas Livestock Lessons

Topic: Winter Feeding

This has been a popular topic for Special Areas ranchers since this past summer, and the momentum is still climbing. Our challenging growing conditions and interesting beef cattle price swings have given ranchers quite a unique set of circumstances to plan for this winter and the upcoming 2016 grazing year.

Here, at the end of November, it is likely you have decided what to feed your cattle this winter, whether its late stubble/regrowth grazing, pea straw, hay, pellets, liquid protein supplements, or one of the other ever growing list of economical cattle feed choices appearing on the prairies. But whichever combination you choose, there are still a few general ration formulation topics we should be keeping in mind as the winter develops.

During the recent Cattlemen's Clinic in Oyen, hosted by Chinook Applied Research Association, Barry Yaremicio, Beef & Forage Specialist with Alberta Agriculture & Forestry gave a quick rundown of the financial and nutritional considerations when feeding cows in a drought year. Here are some of the highlights:

Basic Rations & Feed Sampling

In order to formulate an economical ration for your herd, it is best to sample the feed you have available. You can test bales by using a forage probe, inserting it between the twines for a representative sample. Feed probes are available for rent from [CARA](#) in Oyen. It is best to sample 20 cores per bale type, selecting each bale randomly. For grain or pellet testing, you can take handfuls of each load and put them in a sample bag. For silage, it is recommended you take a handful per load when dumped in the pit, or 10-15 cores from across the pit, to a depth of 6 ft. Samples can be sent to forage labs for analysis (a complete list of labs can be found [here](#)). You can also send your samples to [CARA](#), who will have the analysis done and results explained to you.

Once you have analysis of your various feed sources, you may want to try a ration building program, such as 'CowBytes', developed by Alberta Agriculture. You can learn more about the \$50 software by clicking [here](#). The program will allow you to build feed rations based on the type, age, condition and expected progeny of a breeding cow/heifer, bulls, feeders, etc. You can also go as far as to include the water sample results from your watering sources, for inclusion into your mineral ration. Feed, mineral and yardage costs are also input in order to provide you the most economical ration with the sources you have available to you.

Some additional resources:

[Winter Feeding Programs for Beef Cows & Calves](#)

[Beef Ration Rules of Thumb](#)

[Major Minerals for Beef Cows](#)

[Nutrients for Cattle](#)

Minimize Stored Feed Loss

If possible, the best way to keep bales from losing their feed value is to store them under a shed, or tarp. If that isn't possible, Yaremcio cautions against stacking bales in a pyramid, but encourages producers to lay their bales out in single rows with 4-6" of space between them. As an in between option, stacking bales like mushrooms, is better than in pyramid stacks, he says. Yaremcio explained that the moisture from snow and rain will roll off the top bales of a pyramid stack, soaking into the bottom bales, causing decay, reduction in feed value and even some toxic moulds. By placing the bales single file without touching, the bales will have a chance to dry out after moisture events. For a more detailed explanation, click [here](#).

Bedding Requirements

Don't forget to include bedding in your calculations! On average, Yaremcio suggests that our area should calculate at 2000lbs (~2 bales) of straw per mature animal for the winter. This will reduce your animals' energy loss and conserve heat during snowy, cold conditions. If straw is hard to come by, Yaremcio recommended trying wood chips or sawdust. You can read some interesting facts & alternative methods for bedding by ForageBeef.ca, [here](#).

Body Condition Scoring

A cow that is 200lbs light going into winter requires an additional 1400lbs of hay just to keep her warm, not gaining. Is that a cost you are willing to incur? Or should you cull that cow now and save the difference? Yaremcio encourages all producers to Body Condition Score their animals before winter hits. You should strive for a BCS of 3.5 for cows going into winter, and a 3.0 after calving. 1 BCS is equal to a loss or gain of 200lbs. For more information on how and why to Body Condition Score your cattle, from the Beef Cattle Research Council, click [here](#) or watch this interesting [video](#).

Not Enough Feed?

If during your calculations you decide you have to reduce your herd size, consider feeding your economic drivers of the operation first- the productive cows, heifers and replacements. Weaned calves should be the first to go.

More resources:

[Fall Cow Herd Management](#)

[Economics and Marketing: Marketing Cull Cows](#)

If you have any additional questions about winter feeding strategies you can call 310-FARM, surf [Ropin' the Web](#) for great resources, or speak with your local Special Areas Agricultural Fieldman.