

Fall Cow-Calf Management Considerations To Reduce Feed Costs



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While harvesting is not in full swing, farmers are making the necessary preparations to begin. The less than optimal weather conditions this year have affected not only hay production but also corn and soybeans.

Hay prices are higher this year than last and high quality hay can, at times be hard to find. In addition corn coproduct prices are higher this year. These prices may become steeper depending on this year's demand for hay and the harvested corn crop.

With winter right around the corner, it is important to prepare for winter feeding. Higher hay prices and supplemental feed costs should motivate producers to evaluate their feed resources and management plans heading into the fall and winter months.

In order to plan for winter feedstuff needs, producers should first evaluate the quality of their hay. The forage analysis will not only tell you the overall quality of the harvested forage, but provide you with necessary information to develop a balanced ration based on the actual quality of that hay. Hay quality, cow weight, milk production, calving season and weather will all have an effect on how much and what type of supplement is needed. Balancing your ration based on the forage analysis and type of supplementation will help prevent underfeeding (which affects production) and overfeeding (reduces supplementation costs) your cattle.

Another way to reduce feedstuff costs is to cull out unproductive animals. As you begin processing cattle to wean calves consider spending a little extra time to identify 'problem' cows. At this time evaluate the mature weights and body condition scores of your cows. This can be a key piece of management information for successful supplementation

of cows through the winter to maintain body condition prior to calving. If you have a set of cows that are thin, you may want to consider separating them from the rest of the herd in order to provide them with additional supplementation. In this way you can target those cows to improve their condition without overconditioning the rest of the herd.

Also check the pregnancy status of replacement heifers and sell all open heifers. Although replacement heifers represent your future genetics, retaining open heifers will only increase the amount of feedstuffs needed until spring.

Cull cows and heifers should be marketed in a timely fashion to reduce feedstuff costs. However, if the cull cows are thin and you have pasture or feedstuffs available, consider feeding cows to regain some condition before marketing. Improving condition on cull cows will generally increase sale weight and the price received for them. Cull cows with poor udder quality or dry quarters, cows with no or worn teeth and cows with damaged hooves or poor foot structure. If you still need to reduce your cow inventory after culling do it in a strategic way.

There are several criteria one can use to strategically cull cows from a herd. Begin first with cows that are the least productive. Retaining cows that are expected to be most productive will set up future marketing opportunities of calf crops on markets that are expected to be short on supply and strong on demand resulting in high calf prices. After culling the least productive cows then begin to look at old cows that are at or near the end of their productive life.

While these are only tips to assist you in reducing feedstuff costs, planning now will help you reduce your supplemental feed costs and overall herd nutrient needs. Δ

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