

Reading Manure Piles Good Way To Evaluate Nutritional Well-Being Of Cattle

SPRINGFIELD, MO.

For many years, television and the movies have depicted the beef cattle business as a glamorous or even romantic way of life.

But at least one important management tool of the business – reading manure piles – isn't glamorous but can be an important part of beef cattle nutrition management.

Eldon Cole, a livestock specialist with University of Missouri Extension, says that when it comes to evaluating the nutritional well-being of cattle, close attention should be paid to the manure they deposit on the pasture. In fact, this skill is often stressed in the grazing schools.

"It's fairly easy to look at manure piles and get an idea about the ration quality. Coarse, mature forages move through the digestive system slowly and result in dry, hard, tall manure piles," said Cole. "In contrast, high-quality forages move right through the animal. Those droppings are softer, contain more moisture and spread out as they hit the ground."

The faster rate of passage results in more available energy for the cattle to use for weight gains, lactation and reproduction. Energy is measured as total digestible nutrients (TDN).

"A lot of hay was harvested two or three weeks later than usual in 2008 due to the rains. Thus the maturity resulted in higher levels of fiber in the hay which reduces the energy value and in turn causes the dry, hard, tall manure piles," said Cole.

Cole says a person can actually kick or dig around in the manure and see the coarse fibers.

The best way to manage around the associated poor performance with high fiber rations is to supplement with protein and/or energy.

Good quality legume or legume-grass mixed hay may serve the purpose, especially for adult cows.

"Wintering calves or yearlings may also get by with the quality hay, but a concentrate supplement is required if higher weight gains are expected," said Cole.

Mature 1,200 pound cows that will calve in the next two to three months need about 25 pounds of hay per day that runs 8 percent or more protein and 54 percent plus of total digestible nutrients (TDN) according to Cole. After calving, the requirement for the same cow jumps 30 to 32 pounds of 10 percent protein hay that runs 58 percent TDN.

A 600-pound steer or heifer expected to gain 1.5 pounds per day, requires 14 to 15 pounds per day of a ration that contains 10 to 11 percent protein and 64 percent TDN. All the values are on a dry matter basis.

"Besides examining manure, laboratory testing forages for protein and energy levels is more certain, scientific method of evaluating forages. But realistically, many cattlemen will never get around to taking a forage test so manure pile reading is the next best evaluation technique," said Cole. △



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