Specialist Offers Cost Cutting Management Practices

DR. JAMES B. NEEL

KNOXVILLE, TENN.

The weather conditions for the Spring of 2008 appear to be resulting in "more" rainfall and has generated some optimism for Tennessee beef producers. That is the "good news."

Now, for the "bad news," and it is really not news – the increased price of fuel, fertilizer and other inputs required for cattle production. The cost of feed, pasture and hay are the major factors in the profitability of cow-calf operations. With these costs negatively impacting profitability, cow-calf producers will need to make adjustments in both cattle and forage management and determine what practices will produce the largest return and keep costs as low as possible.

1. Cull open beef females. Other candidates for culling would be those that have "attitude problems," cows 10 years or older, cows with physical problems and other faults that limit their productivity and value. Do not feed a non-productive cow high-priced feed.

2. Evaluate winter feed needs in late spring or early summer. First determine what kind and the number of cattle you plan to carry through the winter. Now, what feed supply do you have on hand? Plan for what will be, not what you hope for.

3. Control weeds. Weeds compete with the forage for water and plant nutrients. In addition, weeds reduce the space where forage can grow or in the case of thistles, prohibit cattle from grazing several feet adjacent to the plant. As weed populations increase, the cost of forage produced goes up. Using herbicides for control will be less expensive than clipping.

4. Lengthen the grazing season. Establish either stock-piled fescue or small-grain pastures, such as rye grass this fall. Cattle can harvest the forage at a substantially lower cost than harvesting, storing and feeding hay. If either stock piling or establishing small grain pastures, the first step in reducing cost is to soil test and follow recommendations.

5. Wean calves early. Wean calves at four to five months of age instead of the seven to nine. A dry, pregnant cow's feed needs will be reduced 25 to 30 percent. Late fall-early winter dropped calves would be excellent calves for weaning. Calves can make more efficient use of the better quality feed and also reduce the total feed cost than if left out on their dams. These cows can also utilize the lower quality forages and gain in both weight and body condition. This practice makes good economical sense. It will add value to the calves, allow the dams to improve reproductive potential and if fencing is available, allow some rest for the pastures that could later be available for stock piling and/for hay.

6. Manage hay to reduce spoilage and loss. Harvest at the proper stage of growth, store off the ground, or better still in a barn, and reduce waste during feeding. Hay losses equal lost returns! Δ

Dr. James B. Neel is Professor Animal Science with the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.