

Winter Cattle Feeding That Doesn't Break The Bank

PRINCETON, KY.

Feeding cattle in the winter can be the single, largest expense for producers. University of Kentucky College of Agriculture beef specialist Roy Burris said this year will not be an exception.

“Due to high input costs, mainly grain and concentrates, this year will present a challenge to producers,” said Burris, stationed at UK's Research and Education Center in Princeton. “There are several management practices that producers can use to lower feed costs and make their herds more profitable.”

Burris said one big way producers can decrease the amount of hay and feed they use is by extending the grazing season as long as possible.

“Last year at Princeton, we had to begin feeding hay in August,” Burris recalled. “This year grazing might continue until Thanksgiving, due to improved moisture conditions. Pastures that have received nitrogen and been allowed to accumulate growth can be grazed even farther into the winter, thus markedly delaying the start of winter feeding. It's also a good idea to strip graze accumulated/stockpiled fescue pastures to avoid waste and increase grazing days on those pastures.”

Producers should pregnancy check the spring-calving cow herd now and eliminate the wintering of open cows – or move them to the fall-calving group.

“Thin cows that are pregnant can be put on stockpiled pasture as soon as their calves are weaned to regain body condition prior to the winter feeding period,” Burris explained. “Favorable prices make this a good time to cull unproductive cows.”

Burris said producers should calculate the amount of hay they need to feed cows through the winter. A rough estimate would be about 2 percent of their bodyweight for about 120 days. That would be approximately 25 pounds per day for 120 days or about 3,000 pounds of hay per cow. Multiply 3,000 pounds by the number of cows in the winter herd to estimate the amount of hay needed.

“You might be able to feed less than 120 days, but don't count on it, and your round bales of hay probably weigh closer to 1,100 to 1,200 pounds rather than the expected 1,500 pounds,” Burris added. “Make sure and get forage analyses on your hay supply, so you can estimate your supplemental feed needs. Supplemental feed purchases can be made ahead of time for best prices.”

It's also a good idea to plan ways to minimize feed losses, he said. Producers could consider using a feeding pad (geotextile fabric and gravel) with hay feeders to minimize mud and waste. Cost share programs may be available in some areas for permanent feeding structures. Feed pads or structures will also minimize damage to pastures during the wet winter months.

Burris said producers also need to consider lower cost alternative feeds when purchasing supplements.

“Be aware of the nutrient value of purchased ingredients – things like rice hulls, peanut hulls, cottonseed hulls, etc. may have very little feed value,” he said. “You should know (based on your forage analyses) if you need protein, energy or both and purchase your feed accordingly.”

Group cattle according to their nutritional needs for winter feeding. There are several distinct management groups in most beef herds such as:

- Cows nursing calves
- Weanling replacement heifers
- Bred yearling heifers
- Dry, pregnant cows
- Herd bulls

Most herds will have at least three of these groups which will benefit from being managed separately, Burris said.

Producers need to give more feed to cows after calving to get calves off to a good start and to maintain cows' body condition.

“Don't let cows lose much condition (flesh) this winter, or next year's pregnancy rates will suffer,” Burris warned. “Calf prices will likely remain high, so attempting to save money by underfeeding the cow herd this winter is bad business for the future.”

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