



# CATTLE SENSE

---

No. 122 December 2010

Dr. Cathy Bandyk

QLF, Dodgeville, WI 53533

---

## /// Bargain Hunting

'Tis the season – of celebrations, of connecting with family and friends, and, of course, of shopping. Everywhere we turn, merchants are vying for our business, assuring us they can provide just what we need, at just the right price. We are left to sort through all the sales, specials and advertisements if we want to find the best bargains.

It can be a lot like choosing a supplementation program for the cowherd. There are lots of choices, and producers need to narrow the list down to those that actually address their operation's needs, and then select the one that offers the best value.

### The Objective

When we set off with our shopping lists, we hopefully have some idea of what we are looking for. We have to know what size, what color, what game system, or which titles or collectibles the recipient already has. When shopping for our cattle, it is critical to know what dietary deficiencies the supplement must correct, and to have an understanding of how specific feeds can enhance or inhibit utilization of the base forage.

In forage-based diets, the greatest supplemental need is typically for degradable protein. That's because most hays and crop residues, and even many silages, do not supply enough of this nutrient to drive optimal rumen activity. And if the bacteria and protozoa find themselves short of ammonia and other protein fractions, they won't be doing their best work for the cow. Less feed will be fermented and broken down, less energy will be released, less microbial protein will be made available to the host animal, and less total feed will go through the system (i.e., intake is limited). A relatively small amount—often in the neighborhood of  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 lb-- of supplemental crude protein can lead to a dramatic turnaround of this scenario, and a significant improvement in cowherd nutrition and performance.

Provision of a complementary energy source can also boost this process. The microbes involved in utilization of roughage feeds can benefit from supplemental sugars or soluble fiber. Starch, however, is used by a different class of bacteria. That is why feeding moderate levels of grain with a forage diet can actually *reduce* the net energy yield to the animal.

Mineral nutrition is also critically important in the cowherd, and a locally-appropriate program can play a big role in supporting health, reproduction, and performance.

### The Voice of Reason

Presents don't necessarily need to be practical, but hopefully the marketing hype won't completely override our common sense. It isn't going to be a successful gift if the new owner isn't allowed to keep it, can't fit it in his living space, or isn't able to operate it!

Similarly, a supplementation program may not be the best choice if it would need storage space that does not exist, if it would require time and labor that is not available, or if it lacks the flexibility to be adapted to each feeding group or scenario in the operation.

### Accessories?

As a parent, I am well aware that the initial gift purchase may be just the beginning! Things like batteries and charging stations, controllers and cords, expansion sets, and extra pieces may be needed before the gift can effectively be enjoyed. In the same way, the direct price of a supplement is only part of the total cost. Economic evaluation needs to include everything involved in placing the needed nutrition in front of the animal.

★ **Equipment.** What equipment is needed to transport, handle, and feed the supplement? Purchase, repair and maintenance become part of the cost of feeding. These costs would need to be added up, and then divided by the expected life of the equipment, and the number of animals being serviced. That gives the equipment cost on a per head per day basis, and when comparing the economics of different programs, it would be added to the price of the feed itself.

★ **Labor.** This is easy to calculate (hours spent feeding X dollars per hour), but sometimes difficult to attach a reasonable dollar value to. With hourly employees, there is an obvious figure to plug into the equation. That is often not the case with family members or salaried workers. But all time has value, because it could be spent in other activities (unless, of course, all useful chores and tasks are caught up!). So even if a specific amount is not calculated, managers need to keep in mind that there are affiliated costs of daily feed delivery that are not part of the “total costs” of free-choice or dealer-delivered supplementation programs.

★ **Transportation.** Like the postage paid for shipping a package, these dollars are an expense we can see. And, in the same way, they may sometimes be nearly as expensive as the item itself! The 2010 mileage rate used by the IRS is \$ .50 a mile; I think we can all agree they are not in the business of cutting us breaks, so that should be a valid figure to use. The other information needed is how far the cattle are located from home, or wherever the individual involved in supplement delivery would typically start out, and how many animals are in the group. The equation we would use is:

$$[\text{Distance} \times 2 \times \$.50] \div \text{number of cattle in group} = \$/\text{hd}/\text{day}$$

Again, this is an amount that would be added to feed cost to estimate overall supplementation expenses. Let’s look at an example, since these can be significant. For daily feeding of a group of 50 cows, located 6 miles away (and note we double the 6, since it is the same distance back home):

$[6 \text{ miles} \times 2 \times \$.50] \div 50 = 12 \text{ cents per head per day}$ , for transportation alone. Again, these are “accessory” costs that should be part of any economic evaluation of supplementation options.

Holiday season or feed season, not every bargain is as good as it first appears.



May all of you be surrounded by friends, family, and the Joy of Christmas. Rejoice!