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For Immediate Release

For More Information:

Milo Schwingle
Marketing Director
Quality Liquid Feeds, Inc.
Dodgeville, WI 53533
Telephone: 800-236-2345
FAX: 608-935-3198
e-mail: Milo@QLF.com

DRYLOT FEEDING FOR BEEF COWS

DODGEVILLE, WISC (JULY 2002)...Conventional wisdom tells us that low-cost cow/calf operations are frequently characterized by minimal use of harvested feedstuffs. Letting cows harvest more of their own feed, through combinations of warm- and cool-season pastures, annual forage crops, and extensive utilization of field crop residues or stockpiled grass, can typically result in significant savings in the total feed bill.

On the other hand, successful cattle producers are becoming increasingly aware that profitability can hinge on their ability to adapt to ever-changing conditions, and a willingness to think 'out of the box' when necessary. For cow/calf operators, a serious evaluation of feeding options can sometimes call for an extreme shift away from a grazing-intensive program.

"We are seeing a limited, but definitely increasing, number of producers feeding a drylot ration to their cows," said Dr. Cathy Bandyk, cow/calf and stocker cattle nutritionist for Quality Liquid Feeds, Inc. "It may be due to the current availability or price of different feeds, or a need or desire to get the cows off the pasture and/or closer to home. And this year, we will see the drought forcing a lot of animals in off their traditional grazing areas."

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Whatever the reason, producers may take one of two basic approaches: full-feed hay with an appropriate supplementation program, or limit-feed a complete bunk ration.

Forage-Based Diets

This may be as simple as providing hay bales in rings along with hand- or self-fed protein and mineral supplements -- something most producers do at some point every winter. However, processing the hay, and feeding it with a supplement in feed bunks, can reduce waste, and give the operator greater control over the diet the cows will receive. And, since this allows force-feeding of a specific amount of supplement on a daily basis, approved feed additives may be included. Monensin, in particular, can help stretch limited or high-priced supplies of moderate- or high-quality hay by improving feed efficiency in beef cows receiving these diets.

A primary concern, however, can be sorting at the bunk. "Just because we offer a given hay and supplement combination in the right proportions doesn't mean the cows will eat them that way," warned Bandyk. "Individual animals can be very effective at picking out the specific feeds or ingredients they prefer."

According to Bandyk, one solution to this problem may be the use of liquid supplements. With the supplemental protein, sugar, minerals and additives applied directly to the forage portion of the diet, cattle are forced to consume the desired balance of nutrients.

A variation that Bandyk says is quickly gaining acceptance is direct treatment of baled forages with a liquid supplement.

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"This practice essentially improves the hay's protein and energy content, especially in lower-quality bales, while at the same time enhancing digestibility and supplying key minerals and vitamins." she said. "Pouring or probing bales can also improve palatability and reduce dustiness, which in turn can significantly reduce feed refusal and waste." This may be of particular importance in drought situations, where the conditions that led to inadequate pasture availability can also result in tight hay supplies.

Stuart Rose is livestock nutritionist for Farmer's Cooperative in Garden Plain, KS. "Treating bales [with liquid supplement] allows our producers to utilize lower-quality forages that the cows wouldn't readily consume otherwise," said Rose. "We treat everything from wheat straw to milo stalks to rained-on alfalfa, and even some better quality forage." Last year the co-op applied molasses-based protein supplement to well over 1000 big round bales.

According to Rose, "It allows the producers to feed bales that would otherwise have to be ground to get the cows to eat them. They'll clean up the feeders and lick the ground; it works!"

Tom Shipley, feed department manager from United Farmer's Mercantile in Red Oak, Iowa, agrees. Their co-op treated more than 500 bales with a 30% protein liquid supplement last year, most of it going on baled corn stalks. "The biggest thing

is the tremendous reduction in waste," said Shipley. "The cows get a lot more out of the treated bales, which lets the producers save their better hay until the cattle need it."

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Shipley added, "Treating bales with liquid can accomplish many of the same goals we try to address with ammoniation, but does so more simply, more safely, and without having to stack bales or mess with plastic."

Limit-fed Grain-based Diets

Whenever hay is in short supply, or it becomes expensive relative to grain, we see a recurring interest in feeding diets fairly high in grain to beef cows. These programs utilize a minimum of forage, and must be limit-fed to prevent over-feeding. However, Bandyk warns that, "while a limit-feeding program may periodically make economic sense, it is only suitable for operations with the adequate facilities and management."

According to Dr. David Lalman, Oklahoma State University, "Limit feeding will not be for everyone. In fact, this technique may be limited to a small percentage of cattle producers . . . Adoption will be limited by the additional labor requirement, management skills, feed storage capacity, and the availability of feed bunks."

As shown in the sidebar, these considerations also need to include secure fences; limit-fed cattle, by definition, will never receive all the feed they are willing to consume, and will be left with time to try searching for more. Bunk space must be adequate for all cows to eat at once: 24 to 30 inches per head, depending on animal size. Feeding at the same time every day is also critical to success.

Keys to Limit-Feeding Beef Cows

- 🔑 Adequate bunk space
- 🔑 Good fences
- 🔑 Cattle sorted by requirements
- 🔑 Same feeding time every day
- 🔑 Gradual work-up to ration
- 🔑 Feed monensin (100-200 mg/hd/d)
- 🔑 Use whole corn, not processed
(never moldy)

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The make-up of a typical limit-fed diet is shown below. Hay should be a long-stemmed grass hay, not alfalfa. Bandyk emphasizes the importance of making the complete switch to a high-grain diet. "Cattle receiving a mix of hay plus only moderate levels of grain, say 4 to 7 pounds for mature cows, will experience impaired utilization of the forage, and won't perform as expected."

DIET	CORN	LONG-STEM HAY	
Gestation	.75 % BW	.5% BW	<i>Plus appropriate supplement</i>
Lactation, average milk	1.0% BW	.5% BW	
Lactation, high milk	1.1% BW	.5% BW	

Producers should take care to select a supplement that will effectively match both the available forage and the needs of the cowherd. "Historically there have been few, if any, commercial supplements on the market designed for this specific use," said Bandyk. "There are certainly 'complete' supplement products available for feedlot use, but the needs of those animals are not identical to the breeding herd. It is also critical to keep in mind the significant changes we see in cow requirements as the animals move through different stages of the production cycle."

Quality Liquid Feeds (QLF) has recently released a line of products tailored to the supplemental needs of beef cows receiving drylot diets. Selections range from 20 to 55% crude protein, and may contain monensin or supplemental fat, as well as a complete mineral package. "We would also expect liquid supplements to provide the

same benefits here that have led to such widespread adoption of liquid feeds in the feedlot industry, " said Evan Vermeer, beef technical consultant for QLF. "Adding these molasses-based feeds to a total bunk ration improves ration consistency, reduces diet sorting -- and therefore digestive upsets -- and improves the response to feed additives."

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