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CATTLE SENSE

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Summer Strategies

With the diverse weather extremes seen across the country this spring, I almost hesitate to write about a "seasonal" topic! But regardless of whether the start of your traditional grazing period featured fires, floods, tornadoes, or drought, the focus now needs to be on managing the summer feeding program.

I realize the phrase *feeding program* is a rather lofty-sounding description for driving through the pasture a few times a month with a mineral/salt block. But I would argue that every diet, no matter how low-input, should be the result of a decision . . . not habit. And that decision should be the result of balancing expected costs and returns of the different options available.

We've all heard 'you can't manage what you can't measure,' and in the cowherd, our practical day-to-day measurement of nutritional status is Body Condition Score (BCS). I think most producers are well aware of the large body of data illustrating the importance of adequate BCS at key points in the production cycle. In particular, researchers have found strong ties between body condition during late pregnancy and a whole range of economically important measures: calving ease, calf viability, calf performance to weaning, length of the post-partum interval to cycling or settling, and overall subsequent pregnancy rate. That is why cattlemen have a financial incentive to ask themselves these questions:

- What is my target BCS for late summer? weaning? calving?
- Will my forage provide for that goal without supplementation?
- Do I want my cows to steadily maintain good BCS through the summer, or am I willing to allow them to lose weight and condition at some point, with the expectation of gaining it back later?

This final question shouldn't be answered without a good feel for what it takes to put condition back on a cow. Specific requirements, as always, vary with cow size, health, environment, feed quality, etc. But the following examples can help illustrate the additional feed costs that may be associated with the need to increase BCS.

Cow size: 1100 lb Stage of production: mid-gestation Body condition: 4 Condition goal: move to BCS 5 in 60 days
Required daily gain (above pregnancy): 1.25 lb Nutrients needed to support 1.25 lb gain: 0.4 lb protein, 3.25 mcal NEg (above maintenance)
OPTION A: 7 lb of soy hulls/head/day at $205/ton, the cost would be $ .7175/day, or $43/head for the 60-day period OPTION B: 5 lb of DDGS/head/day at $230/ton, the cost would be $ .575, or $34.50/head for the 60-day period

Each individual situation will vary, of course, but this should give some perspective to the concept of a one-score shift in a 60-day period. Keep in mind that these values represent nutrients that would have to be provided above and beyond maintenance. In the real world, chances are good that the only reason cows need to gain condition in the first place is because the available forage is inadequate. So the actual feeding program may need to involve even higher levels of supplementation in order to address both maintenance requirements and weight gains.

This second example ties in some additional pressures: slightly larger cows, some winter weather (calculated with an average temperature of 35°F and 5 mph winds), and delaying feeding until late gestation.

Cow size: 1300 lb Stage of production: late gestation Body condition: 4 Condition goal: move to BCS 5 in 45 days
Required daily gain (above pregnancy): 2.1 lb Nutrients needed to support 2.1 lb gain: 0.65 lb protein, 5 mcal NEg (above maintenance)
OPTION A: 10 ½ lb of soy hulls/head/day at $205/ton, the cost would be $1.076/day, or $48.43/head for the 45-day period OPTION B: 7 ½ lb of DDGS/head/day at $230/ton, the cost would be $ .8625, or $38.81/head for the 45-day period

Keep in mind, too, that the costs shown above are for the additional feed only. Actual expenses would also include the time, transportation, and possibly equipment utilized to deliver it as well.

It is clear, then, that two possible feeding strategies can carry significant costs: allowing cows to simply lose weight and remain thin will result in lost production, and regaining body condition after it has been lost will require substantial supplemental feed. The third option, maintaining cow BCS year-round, is often the most cost-effective program.

The foundation of this approach is typically strategic supplementation, providing relatively small amounts of a high-protein feed to complement and enhance utilization of late-season grazing and hay. Meeting the nitrogen needs of the rumen microbes in this way has a major impact on both intake and nutrient yield of these forages.

While this addresses the "supply" side of the equation, cattlemen also have multiple opportunities to manage nutrient "demand" as well. Any practice that reduces the amount of energy and(or) protein required by the herd will make it easier to maintain cow BCS, even as forage quality declines. This includes a good preventive health program (vaccines, mineral nutrition), control of both internal and external parasites, and, when necessary, early weaning.

The bottom line: it's worth the time it takes to evaluate the summer feeding program, and its impact on the rest of the year.