



10 winter-feeding tips

Clint Peck, Director of Montana Beef Quality Assurance Program*

Want some “hot” advice on ways to cheapen cow-herd rations as fall and winter approach? After visiting with John Paterson, Montana State University Extension beef specialist, and ranchers from diverse locations, here’s a top-10 list of cost-saving tips adaptable to about any winter grazing situation and geographic location.

1. Balance rations

Balance rations to be “best-cost” rations, realizing that they may not be least-cost rations, Paterson says.

“Understand the nutrient requirements for a weight or age class, or stage of production, of the cow, calf or bull,” Paterson says. “Cow nutrient requirements ? dry matter intake, energy intake, etc. ? are different for replacement heifers.”

Paterson likes ranchers to know the differences in the nutrient requirements for a cow in the middle trimester of gestation vs. the final trimester.

2. Flexibility

Johnny Weese's key to keeping cow wintering costs down is flexibility. The Fisher, WV, rancher rents dormant fescue pasture when he needs some low-cost winter grazing.

“I don't normally like fescue,” he says. “But we can go in behind yearlings after the first good frost and get 60 days of good pasture on dormant fescue.”

This year, Weese is gearing up to feed corn silage, which he says will be available due to drought stress. “The corn around here just isn't going to ear-up, but it will make good forage.”

3. Standing forage

Of course, one of the best ways to cheapen a winter ration is to have enough standing forage to keep the cows out grazing as long as possible, aided by a small amount of high-protein supplement, says Gene Vieh, Kaycee, WY. But when Vieh feeds a supplement he likes to be strategic about what he feeds.

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“The higher the protein amount in the supplement, the fewer trips you'll have to make to the pasture,” he says. “Those extra trips with the feed truck cost money.”

4. Health and nutrition

Nutrition and health programs depend on each other. When developing a year-round nutrition program, Paterson wants the local veterinarian to be a part of the management team to cover all the bases. This includes vaccinations, parasite control, biosecurity measures and recordkeeping. Cattle performance will suffer if either nutrition or the health programs is deficient.

Not providing an adequate amount of any nutrient (water, energy, protein, vitamins and minerals) may result in compromised immune function, reduced conception rates and lighter calves.

5. Forage analysis

Paterson always recommends obtaining a forage analysis of hay supplies well in advance of winterfeeding.

“Then, a rancher knows how much energy and protein is available,” Paterson says. “A water analysis should also be done to check for detrimental antagonists like nitrates or sulfates.”

Vieh likes to include an analysis of fecal samples as a nutrient balance gauge.

6. Body condition score

Split the cowherd into groups based on body condition score (BCS). Paterson likes to see the herd split into groups of animals with good BCS (greater than 5) and those with poorer BCS (less than 5). “Why feed the entire herd an expensive ration when only the thin cows need it?” he asks.

“Depending on the winter, we might or might not sort and feed the cows according to age and body condition,” Vieh says. “Sorting is a pain in the neck, but we'll do it if we're facing a bad winter.”

7. Wheat or barley straw

Paterson likes to use wheat or barley straw in the rations he formulates. He does this to cheapen the ration, prevent over-feeding of nutrients, and control rates of gain for cows and even heifers.

Recently, because of drought conditions, Paterson's balanced many rations based on barley-grain hays, alfalfa and wheat straw. These rations often do not require additional supplementation other than a mineral supplement.

Weese says rolled-up corn stalks serve the same purpose in his region. “Corn stalks make great filler and there's not a lot of waste.”

8. Alternative feeds

Determine if feed or food-industry byproducts can be used as supplements ? wheat midds, distiller's grains, peas, carrots, corn gluten feed and even whole potatoes. One of Paterson's favorite rations had rejected caramel candy in cardboard boxes. The cows ate the candy and the boxes. He's seen rations that had rejected hard Christmas candy, corn chips and even chocolate.

Weese plans to use brewer's grain this year on cows that need a little extra boost before calving ? mixing the wet grain with corn silage and hay. “We've got a Coors brewery over in the Shenandoah Valley that is close enough to make it worthwhile.”

For more detail on the typical composition of more than 300 feeds commonly fed to cattle and sheep in the U.S., view *BEEF* magazine's “2007 Feed Composition Tables” published in the March issue of *BEEF* and available at www.beefmagazine.com. It's in the “resources” section of the opening page.

9. Weight

Know the weight of your cows using a scale. Paterson says a rancher who underestimates average cow weight by up to 200 lbs. could see a 4- to 5-lb. difference in dry matter consumption each day.

Vieh knows his mature cows average 1,080 lbs. "We can't let cow weight get out of hand," he says.

10. Feed waste

Minimize feed waste. Research shows that the method of feeding hay can have a dramatic influence on hay waste.

Marc King, Sweetgrass County, MT Extension educator, says he's worked with a Big Timber, MT, rancher who's saved \$9,000 in hay cost purchasing a bale processor. The rancher partitions the hay out in smaller packages on a daily or alternate-day basis. This practice has been shown to produce less waste than providing free-choice consumption by feeding once weekly.

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