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Saving Winter Feed Dollars

As I write this, winter has officially started, although the milder temperatures make one think we might avoid winter? Cold, winter weather is inevitable in the coming weeks, which means livestock will need to consume more feed to meet body maintenance energy requirements. Feeding harvested forage - predominantly dry hay - is the way most livestock producers “fill the gap” nutritionally in this time of year. Research has shown that annually, as much as 45% of hay is wasted. Winter feed cost historically are the largest part of the annual cow cost, so making the most of this expense or reducing the cost is critical. Here are some tips for saving, rather than wasting, winter feed dollars for livestock.

This seems over simple, but the longer the animal grazes, the less harvested forage needed! I’m fairly certain bison historically grazed this region without a round bale feeder to be found. Any approach that extends the grazing season will help cut winter feeding cost, especially in this relatively high hay market. This might mean stockpiled pastures, utilizing crop residues, cover crops or even swath grazing. This approach may require a manger mindset change, but can be done very successfully through some fairly extreme winter conditions.

If you’ve not been able to “kick the hay habit”, as Jim Gerrish writes about, how do you make the most of the hay you have? Control feed storage losses on hay bales. Storage losses can easily range from 2-18%. Using net wrap, storing hay off the ground, creating proper hay stacks and utilizing tarps or barn storage all help reduce loss.

Test feedstuffs. Testing is the only way to determine nutrient content of forage. Spending a few dollars on forage analysis can have a high rate of return through more effective use of forage. Supplementation is nearly always required, so compare supplement price based on unit of energy or protein. Base your purchase on price and content of the nutrients needed from the forage test.

Restrict feeding losses. Losses of feeding large, round hay bales may reach 20-30% of the dry matter fed. Simple differences in the design of round bale feeders can account for up to 11% of the feeding loss. Feeders with barriers around the bottom prevent livestock from pulling hay loose with their feet and dragging it out to be stepped or laid on.

Feeding bales in relatively large feeders, limiting feed supply to a daily ration and limiting access to feeders for 8-12 hours/day are all methods that may reduce feed losses. If you unroll bales or grind and feed on the ground, position an electric fence alongside or above the hay to keep cows from trampling or bedding down on the hay. The old adage with unrestricted hay feeding sites is: day one is a dining room, day two a bedroom and day three the bathroom.

Consider splitting the herd into feeding groups. Growing two/three-year olds, along with old/thin cows can be in one group, with higher quantity and quality feed. Mature, more dominant, higher-conditioned cows go into another group. Young growing calves and mature bulls will not have the same requirements as gestational cows, so most often are separated and fed differently. Lactation creates much higher nutritional demands, so cows with calves likely need to be fed separately as well.

Finally, the management that can have lasting impacts on feed resources, is to change the cowherd itself. This can be accomplished by maintaining moderate-sized, more efficient cows. Everyone has their take on “moderate”, but generally speaking, maintenance energy requirements are directly related to cow weight. Efficiency has become a buzz word in the industry and can have as wide of an interpretation as moderate, but selection for efficient cows who can consume less feed and wean larger calves is a goal. Along with this, producers are encouraged to look at system measures, such as pounds weaned per acre, versus larger individual weaning weights, when looking at efficiency.