

Thinking about Fall Feeding Needs

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This summer Colorado had abundant snow in the northwest and extreme drought in the southeast. Feeding strategies for the fall and winter will vary depending what conditions a producer summered in and how well the cows fed and the fall feed available.

Fall and early winter are a time when livestock producers have an opportunity to change the body condition of their beef cattle. As cows and calves are separated for weaning this creates an opportunity to Body Condition Score (BCS) the cows. The BCS will give a good indication of the nutritional health of the herd. It will also let the producer know if their cows are in good condition going into winter or need to add condition, or put on weight.

For cows that are in a low BCS, the dry period from weaning until the fetus begins growing is the time to increase their condition score. The 1-9 scoring system is used across the industry. A BCS of 5 is considered good for cows. A score closer to 6 is often preferred for first calf heifers.

The time from weaning until about 90 days before calving is a time that pregnant cows nutrient requirements are lowest. They aren't nursing a calf, the fetus they carry isn't growing fast and they can take care of their own maintenance or growth needs easier. This coincides with the middle third of gestation for many producers.

Economically, this is also the time to put weight on cows. The feed resource is utilized for maintenance and gain, if necessary, but not lactation or fetal growth. Because the needs of the cows are less now, the nutritional quality that must be supplied can also be lower.

If cows are in a BCS of 5 or higher the dry mature fall forage may be adequate to maintain the condition of the cows.

If the cows need to gain weight it will be easier, and cost less, to put it on now than when the nutrient needs are higher. This time of year some mineral supplement will likely be needed. On the bright side, if cows are in good shape no additional protein or energy supplement may be in order.

If protein supplementation is needed, consider alfalfa as a source. Protein is an expensive nutrient to supplement. Alfalfa is often the least expensive protein supplement. A few pounds per day can go a long way to helping cows during the post weaning period. A feed analysis will help answer the question of how much of a feed is needed to meet the needs.

Energy supplementation is also expensive. It is most easily done with grain such as corn, barley or wheat. It can also be supplemented using molasses or similar high sugar supplements. Cost is high, so, supplementing after weaning will cost less than trying to put on weight when overall nutritional needs are higher.

Any feed you have locally may be less expensive to use when transportation is considered. Make sure it will accomplish the task you have assigned it. Keep in mind a cow will consume 1 to 3 percent of her body weight per day. Forage quality and the cows nutritional requirements makes a difference on how much forage is needed to meet her needs.

Contact your local Extension Agent for additional information on feeding throughout the year.