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Over And Under Feeding

While this winter has been fairly open allowing us to utilize grazing opportunities, snow later on in the year is always a possibility. When the drifts get deep, hay is the feed of choice to get our animals through. While an invaluable feed resource, the cost of getting a herd through the winter can be substantial.

Hannah Greenwell, Extension Beef Educator in a recent article points out that one of the easiest ways to overspend feeding is by providing animals more than they need. On the flip side, underfeeding can lead to thin cows and down the road calving issues and low conception rates. Neither one is desirable. So how do we make sure to get animals exactly what they need? The first step is getting a forage test.

When we get tests back, I'd wager that there is going to be some differences in the different cuttings and types of hay you have on hand. While it might seem minor, even as little of a difference as 2% in crude protein content can have a huge impact.

Let's take a hay that tests at 9% crude protein and compare it with one at 7%. A 1,300 lb. spring calving cow in her second trimester needs about 1.6 lb. of crude protein on a dry matter basis in her diet daily to meet her nutritional needs. For our 9% protein hay, this cow needs to consume 17.8 lb. dry matter of hay daily. Feeding the 7% protein hay, this jumps to 22.9 lb. While 5 lbs. doesn't seem like that much, spread that out over a herd of 100 animals and that's 500 lbs. dry matter daily (555 lb. as fed).

If you take it one step further and drop the hay to 5% crude protein, that same cow now needs to consume 32 lb. of hay on a dry matter basis daily. That's now 14 additional lbs. on a dry matter basis needed with a change of just 4% protein. Again spread that out over a 100 cow herd and we need 1,400 additional lbs. of hay on a dry matter basis (1554 lb. as fed).

Given slower digestibility with a low quality feed, it's probably likely the cow can't even eat enough hay to meet this requirement. At this point, now we need to begin adding in an additional supplement earlier than we probably planned to keep the cow from losing condition.

To look at this another way, good quality brome hay is going for around $100 per ton according to the USDA Nebraska Hay Report. Even comparing the 9% to 7% hay, the additional hay is going to cost the 100 cow herd an additional $832.50 each month. That's a pretty nice chunk of change that could be spent elsewhere, especially when the cost of running a forage sample is usually less than $20. If you need help figuring out exactly what that diet should look like, bring your feed tests in to any beef systems extension educator and we'd be happy to help walk through it with you.

This winter, take some time to look at your feeding plan, especially if the snow starts to fly. Feeding animals what they need can keep the heard happy and healthy and your pocket book full.

-Ben Beckman is a beef systems Extension Educator serving the counties of Antelope, Cedar, Knox, Madison and Pierce. He is based out of the Cedar County Extension office in Hartington. You can reach him by phone: (402) 254-6821 or email: ben.beckman@unl.edu .