Assess Options for Feeding Distillers Grains

Hay prices have zoomed up in response to hay moving south into drought zones. This may get beef cow operations to look at feeding distiller grains, even with the high price of corn. Feeding distillers grains to cattle on pasture can be a difficult task. On many cow-calf operations, producers commonly rotate cattle among pastures, which would require moving feed bunks if distillers grains are being fed that way. Producers can use various methods to make this task easier.

One of the easiest ways is to feed distillers grains directly on the ground. However, for this to be cost effective, a producer must first know how much waste occurs when cattle are fed on the ground. University of Nebraska Extension has conducted research on the difference in waste when feeding wet and dry distillers grains to cattle either in a bunk or on the ground. Researchers observed the difference in weight gain and performance between cattle fed distillers grains in a bunk and cattle fed the same amount of distillers grains on the ground. Because the energy content of both the cattle’s weight gain and distillers grains are known, they were then able to calculate how much distillers grains fed on the ground was wasted to see that difference in gain.

Research showed waste was between 15 and 18 percent when cattle were fed wet distillers grains on the ground. Waste was between 35 and 40 percent when dry distillers grains were fed on the ground. The difference in waste may be because of the particle size of the distillers grains. If they are wet, the particles stick together allowing better access for cattle to pick up more when on the ground. If they are dry, the particles are small and don't have moisture allowing them to stick together, which makes it more difficult for the cattle to pick them up. Some type of portable feeder would be wise. Even if the cattle’s pasture is not rotated, the feeding site should be rotated for several reasons. Distillers grains are high in phosphorous, so both manure and feed waste are a fertilizer source for the pasture which needs to be rotated. Wet distillers grains are highly palatable. So cattle will move to where they are being fed. Feeding sites will be more effective than moving salt or even water locations in getting cattle to graze all parts of the pasture. Another thing producers will need to do is to plan out pasture entrance locations, driving patterns and feed delivery to the bunk. Cattle like this stuff and PTO lines and tractor tires are only obstacles keeping them from the feed.

This research on the waste from feeding on the ground doesn't mean producers can't or shouldn't feed distillers grains on the ground. It all depends on the alternative option's cost. Though there is that waste with wet or dry distillers grains, producers could still feed for less total money and incur the waste compared to some other alternatives.

Pencil out costs and options on feeding beef cows carefully. Feed is the number one cost factor and even with high cattle prices, feed costs can get out of hand and consume all the profit and more.

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