

Supplements Improve Calf Performance

Feed your cows correctly and steer calves will gain more weight and more heifers will get pregnant. As winter forage quality declines and cow nutrient demands increase, wise operators begin to feed protein supplements to assure healthy calves plus cows that will re-breed rapidly. But protein supplements can be expensive, so we usually try to feed only as much as the cow needs to stay healthy.

New research, though, suggests that this strategy of minimizing input costs may overlook the impact supplements have on the future performance of the calf. Recent research has shown that properly supplementing the cow can increase profitability of the calf she's carrying. In one study, steers from cows that received protein supplement while grazing winter range produced an extra 60 pounds of carcass weight per animal compared to steers from non-supplemented cows.

In other studies, the pregnancy rate of heifers from cows that received protein supplements while grazing corn residue or winter range was higher than heifers from non-supplemented cows. And steers from these supplemented cows graded choice more often.

This outcome, where supplementing protein to the cow improves the performance of her calves later in life is called fetal programming. It is thought to occur because fetal growth rate is highest during the last third of gestation so nutrient requirements of the cow and her calf are higher than earlier in her pregnancy. Most winter grazing programs use low quality forages so adequate supplementing can pay big dividends.

As cows approach calving time, don't scrimp on the protein. Feed what is needed, both for the cow and her calf. You'll be money ahead.

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