

FEEDING ALFALFA AS A PROTEIN SUPPLEMENT

Feeding more alfalfa hay than cattle need gets expensive. Save money by feeding just enough alfalfa to provide the protein your animals need.

Cattle often need extra protein when their winter diet is based on corn stalks, prairie hay, straw, or winter range. The protein supplement you chose is important, both in its effectiveness and its cost. Many cheap protein sources contain mostly urea and other forms of non-protein nitrogen. These supplements may not be used very effectively when cattle are eating mostly low energy winter forages.

Supplements containing mostly all-natural protein may be better. All-natural protein feeds the microbes in the rumen so they can digest more fiber from your forage. And many times the cheapest natural source of protein is alfalfa, even when hay price is high.

Keep costs down by determining how much extra protein your cows actually need. Both a forage test for protein and a close estimate of how much your cows are actually eating are needed to be accurate. Then you can work with a local extension educator, a nutritionist, or use your own skills to calculate how much more protein is needed.

Most winter forage diets need between one-half and one pound of extra protein per day. Since the forage test of your alfalfa will tell you how much protein it contains, you can calculate how much alfalfa to feed each day, or every other day, to keep cows healthy and productive. This could come from as little 2 pounds of hay when feeding very high protein alfalfa to cows needing only a little extra protein to as much as 8 to 10 pounds when using low quality alfalfa for cows on a very low protein diet.

It may not sound like a big difference, but when you feed just two or three pounds each day per cow, the savings add up fast.

Bruce Anderson
Extension Forage Specialist
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
402-472-6237