

WEB CONTENT DISPLAY
January 7, 2011

STALKS ARE NOT WHAT THEY USED TO BE

Corn stalks have been the main winter feed resource for area cattle producers. But increasingly, their value is being questioned. Some growers say corn stalks are not taking care of their cows like they did 20 years ago, and they may be right, according to Bruce Anderson, UNL Extension forage specialist. Both stalks and cattle have changed a lot in the last couple decades. Stalk changes start with modern combines that collect grain much more effectively than they did 20 years ago. Growers used to estimate that 4% of the grain would be left in the field after combining. Today the amount is probably half that or 2%. Less grain means cows need to be supplemented earlier so they don't go out of condition. This also may lower eventual production capacity of the calves.

Are today's stalks less nutritious? Modern hybrids draw large amounts of nutrients out of the stalk and into the kernel. Genetic modifications for insect resistance and reduced lodging have produced stalks that may be less palatable and provide fewer digestible nutrients. However, early research at UNL in 2001 proved no difference in steer performance and preference due to the incorporation of the Bt trait.

On the other side of the equation, today's cows are larger and need more forage and often more supplementation than yesterday's smaller cows. A quarter section of stalks won't carry as many cows as it once did. Even when stocking adjustments are made, if supplements aren't also adjusted accordingly, cow performance may suffer.

As winter forage quality declines and cow nutrient demands increase, wise operators begin to feed protein supplements to ensure healthy calves that will rebreed rapidly. That can be expensive, so usually producers feed only as much as the cow needs to stay healthy. New research suggests this strategy of minimizing input costs may overlook the impact supplements have on the future calf performance.

Recent research has shown that proper supplementing the cow can increase profitability of the calf she's carrying. In one study, steers from cows that received protein supplements while grazing winter stalks produced an extra 60 pounds of carcass weight worth \$80 to \$100 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 5 to 14% higher than heifers from non-supplemented cows. Also, steers from these supplemented cows graded choice 5-23% more often.

Because fetal growth rate is highest during the last third of gestation, nutrient requirements of the cow and her calf are higher than earlier in her pregnancy. Most winter grazing is on low quality forages so adequate supplementation can pay big dividends.



Cow/Calf College Program: “Partners in Progress – Beef Seminar” will be held at the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center and Great Plains Veterinary Education Center near Clay Center on Tuesday, January 18th, with registration at 9:00 a.m. The program will run from 9:50 a.m. until approximately 3:45 p.m. Any beef producer or other interested individual should pre-register by Thursday, January 13th, by calling (402) 746-3417 to insure a seat and lunch.

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