

Planning for Late Fall and Winter Grazing

First cut hay is now mostly put up and thoughts turn to assigning fields for late grazing. Candidate fields may have already been grazed and are now in recovery. For some fields fertilization can help develop good root growth and will increase the aerial leaf portion. Light fertilization with phosphorous and nitrogen will strengthen roots and boost leaf production. This is dependant on moisture being available to carry fertilizer plant nutrients into the root zone. Fields which have been droughty for several years and heavily grazed can benefit from extra nutrients to get through winter. A small amount of fertilizer can positively affect protein levels of forages also.

For stockpiled forages once mature they begin to lose quality due to increasing lignin levels. Exposure to sun, water and wind degrades feed quality once the stand stops growing. Protein content of stockpiled forage tends to be low ranging approximately between 2% and 6% with high NDF values. Digestibility of this material is slow and can be limited by energy and protein values. Once the time comes to place cows on the stockpiled material, testing of the forages to be grazed can be done by clipping samples across the field giving a start point for the nutrition program. Everything is costly these days so accurate use of resources leads to best cost production giving the highest chance for profitability. Avoiding over or under feeding helps the animals stabilize body condition maintaining the developing calf.

Under feeding can put the cow into a negative energy balance which sets off an alarm to the body. Even though there may be enough carrying capacity for the animals to eat to be full, the quality of what is being eaten needs to meet the nutrient requirements of the animals. If cows are persistently falling short of nutrients then fat reserves are mobilized and body condition scores fall at a time of year where the plan is to build condition for the upcoming winter. High NDF with low protein stockpiled forage is good to extend grazing days and lower production cost but it benefits the herd greatly when supplemented properly and in a timely way. Rumen microorganisms only digest high NDF material when nitrogen and energy are available in the rumen. Where shortfalls exist digestion is slowed because the time forages spend in the rumen increases and emptying slows. Supplementation can be accomplished easily and with accuracy by using a Highline® Bale Pro® equipped with a Grain Tank and Feed Chopper™. High protein forages can be mixed with grain to be metered out in a windrow calculated on a per cow basis to supply the needed nutrients. This supplement is best fed into a bunk to ensure best consumption of expensive ingredients. Once net wrap is removed chopped forage can be used to dilute the high protein/energy source and allow equal consumption by all animals.

Supplementation has two main benefits. The first benefit is supplying accurate amounts of energy and protein to complement what is being consumed during grazing. Generally intake is estimated based on the weight and age of the animal then consideration is made for the weather and shelter available to the cow. Testing the forages will let producers calculate net daily intake of nutrients and this can be compared to the requirements for an animal of average weight and size. If there is a nutrient short fall then a supplement can be formulated and delivered with accuracy. The second benefit is that as the supplement is consumed it will have a higher nutrient density than the stockpiled forage and so displace some of the grazed forage. This has the dual effect of meeting the cows need to feel satisfied with what she is eating, and, will lower daily intake of forage thereby increasing grazing days for the herd. Over supplementing can have a negative effect on forage digestion so take time to test ingredients and forages and accurately assess needs of the animals.

Planning for fall and winter grazing starts now with examination and assessment of candidate fields. The Bale Pro is a tool that can help improve feeding accuracy and help in managing the nutrient delivery program assisting the producer in reaching the target of one calf per cow per year to be profitable.

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