

Preparing for Winter Livestock Needs

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Although we've had snow on the ground for a month, it seems that winter is beginning to set in. This is a great time to assess not only your cow herd but also your feed inventory and other resources. Weather plays a critical role in how we feed our cows.

In general, a 1,400-pound cow in good body condition during the last 90 days of gestation requires a little over 2 pounds of protein and 14.5 pounds of energy. Low-quality forages in the pasture do not meet the minimum requirements, especially protein, of the cows this time of year. Therefore, supplementation is needed keep cows in good body condition prior to calving, which impacts lactation, calf health, and production. An accurate inventory of all feeds should be collected to determine if additional feeds need to be purchased. As an example, if a 1,400-pound cow eats between 30-35 pounds of feed each day, she will consume approximately 960 pounds of feed in 1 month. Depending on the weather and individual calving season, cows could be fed 60-90 days, which equates to 1,920 to 2,880 pounds of feed for a single cow. Another way of considering your inventory is at a minimum, approximately 2 bales weighing 1,400 pounds per cow for a 3-month feeding period.

This is a basic feed inventory method; it does not account for changes in weather conditions when additional feed may be needed to maintain the cow herd. As the temperature decreases as winter progresses, cows require more nutrients to maintain production and fetal development. Therefore, as a general rule of thumb it is recommended to have at least 2 years of stockpiled forage on-hand to account for additional feed needed and/or to prepare for the next drought.

This is also a good time to assess the cow herd and how/when feeding adjustments should occur to maintain production. Following weaning, cow nutrient requirements are at the lowest throughout the year. This is an excellent opportunity to add additional body condition on thin cows before late gestation and prior to deep winter. Maintaining an optimum body condition score of 5 to 6 aids in fetal development, calf immune status, milk quality and quantity, and uterine involution post-calving. Assessing the cow herd also aids in determining how to best use the feed inventory and identify which groups of cattle that may require more feed or a more nutrient dense diet. Young cows (2-3 years old), first-calf heifers, and poor conditioned cows tend to require a more nutrient dense diet than mature cows in good condition.

These are a couple of things to consider as we prepare for the winter months and feeding season. Please Megan Van Emon call, 406-874-8286, or email, megan.vanemon@montana.edu for more information. Or contact your local Extension agent with additional questions.