**Ideas for Stretching Hay Supplies**

I have used some of this information in previous articles on years when hay supplies were short, unfortunately due to short hay supplies, the information is relevant again this year.

David Lalman, OSU Extension cattle specialist has some good tips to help conserve your hay supplies. According to Lalman winter hay needs can be reduced by almost a third by using two of these three strategies: feed an ionophore, limit-feed hay and reduce hay waste.

**Feed an ionophore**. In an OSU study, cows receiving common prairie hay and 2 lbs./day of supplement (30% crude protein) with 200 mg/day of Rumensin® – the only ionophore labeled for use in breeding cows – gained 30 lbs., or about a half of one body condition score (BCS), over 58 days. The cost of feeding the ionophore was 2¢/day. In previous research, Rumensin in cow rations reduced feed intake by about 10% without affecting performance. But be careful as Rumensin is very toxic to horses. Killing the wife’s horse may not be worth the reduced feed intake?

**Limit feed hay.** Cows need to be in a minimum BCS of 4-5 to limit feed hay. This limit-feeding strategy, which is often used in growing cattle, improves feed efficiency, increases digestibility and decreases waste. Based on previous research, giving cows access to hay for six hours/day – fencing off hay feeders as an example – rather than unlimited access, reduces intake by 20%. If access can’t be restricted, Lalman suggests estimating the amount of hay cows require daily and then reducing it by 20%. Across 85-90 days, Lalman says research indicates that cows limit-fed hay will lose 20-40 lbs., or about half of one BCS. If it’s a viable option, Lalman emphasizes that utilizing the strategy can reduce hay needs by 20%.

 **Reduce hay waste.** Any type of hay feeder is more efficient than using none at all, but the specific type of feeder used makes a huge difference in waste. For instance, an open-bottom bale ring – no sheeting around the bottom – means about 21% of the hay put into it is wasted, according to OSU research. “Losing 21% of prairie hay that costs more than $150/ton gets expensive”. Compare that to a modified-cone feeder. Waste associated with this design is about 5%. Just adding sheeting to the bottom of an open-bottom bale ring reduces waste from 21% to about 13%. If you do not have any round bale feeders consider unrolling hay (when conditions are not too wet or muddy), but only put out what they can consume in one feeding. More than that and the cattle will bed in it and you are going to have lots of waste.

 Lalman says that by using just two of these three strategies, you can save 30% of your hay cost.

Some other factors to consider are how much do your cattle weigh and how much do your rolls of hay weigh? Round bale weights that I see typically vary from 750 to 1300 lbs., with the majority falling in the 850 to 1000 lb. range. Judging cattle weights can also be hard, most of the cattle in the county are nice moderate sized cattle that will weigh in the 1200 lb. range, some larger framed cattle will be heavier and some smaller framed or longhorn types will be lighter. It is important to have an idea on both these items as all rations must start with an idea of cow weight. A general rule of thumb is a cow will need 3% of her body weight in hay. Using that rule a 1,000-pound bale and a 1,200-pound cow. With easy math, each cow needs 36 pounds of hay a day. That lets one 1000 lb. roll feed 27 cows with a little to spare. You do not have to know the weight of each individual cow, but perhaps you have weights of some cull cattle you have sold in the past, this might give you a starting point for cattle weight. It is not that hard to weigh a trailer load of round bales at one of the many scales in the county, then average that out.

Certainly, not all hay is created equal and different classes of cattle will require different qualities of hay. A mid-gestation cow can get by with 7% crude protein (CP) and 55% Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN), this is just a fair to good quality hay. A cow with a calf at her side will need 11% CP and at 65% TDN, this would be a good to very good quality hay. When possible grouping your cattle by nutritional need will make feeding much simpler, reduce waste and lower the potential for poor cattle.

If you use some of these simple figures and count the hay in your stack and can tell you are going to be deficient, you will need to consider supplementing part of your herds nutritional requirements with some type of feed product. Thanks to an excellent corn crop in the Midwest, feed prices are not too high this winter, this makes feeding a supplement a very viable option. This is one of those years where if you have some hay, it is probably better to try and stretch it with some additional supplementation rather than purchase more hay.