

Don't Forget to Consider Alternative Feedstuffs During Drought

Many producers across the state have exhausted most of their hay supplies and reserves from the year before. Despite the recent showers, the NOAA is predicting a continued drought weather pattern as part of a La Niña event, which may result in dry weather into summer. Warm weather and moisture may bring some temporary relief to fescue and to winter annuals such as cereal rye, wheat, and ryegrass; however, dryer conditions will result in limited growth and forage availability.

Whether you are feeding hay or grazing winter pasture, by-product feeds may help you stretch short supplies. Research with stocker cattle on wheat pastures have demonstrated that supplements can result in a nearly pound-for-pound substitution rate for this high-quality forage.

Another factor to consider is that the value per unit of protein and energy from grains and by-product feeds will likely be greater than the value of the hay that is purchased. (This is before factoring in the cost of shipping.) For example, alfalfa hay at \$100 per ton is only worth about \$76 per ton when its nutritional value is compared to that of corn and soybean meal. However, corn gluten feed priced at \$84 per ton is worth about \$105 per ton based on its nutritional content compared to the value of corn and soybean meal. It is evident that before shipping costs are considered, the corn gluten is a more economical buy from a protein and energy supply standpoint than the alfalfa hay.

Feeding by-products such as corn gluten pellets, soybean hulls, or rice bran at 1% of body weight could substitute for about 1/3 of a good quality hay- or growing-forage diet. Roughage sources such as cottonseed hulls, coarsely ground rice hulls, and coarsely ground peanut hulls can substitute for roughage in the diet; however, these feedstuffs are low in protein and poorly digestible. They should not be used alone when substituting for hay.

Mixtures of by-products, whole grains, high protein meals, and a limited source of roughage can be fed at rates that will supply adequate protein and energy to the cow while limiting intake. This is usually termed program feeding. Dr. Stacey Gunter at the University of Arkansas's Southwest Research and Extension Center in Hope has evaluated the response to this type of diet for wintering beef cows. Results demonstrated that cows program-fed a high-concentrate diet maintained similar productivity compared to cows fed free-choice hay and supplement—but feed cost was reduced by more than 40%. Example diets can be found on the Cooperative Extension Web site (www.uaex.edu) under *Agriculture—Beef—Nutrition and Feeding—Frequently Asked Questions*.

The downside to feeding alternatives in place of hay or pasture include the need for bulk purchase and storage to make the practice economically feasible. This may be a good use for that empty hay shed. Feeding grains will also require feed bunks and adequate bunk space for all cows to be able to eat. It is difficult to salt limit rations for high rates of intake, so daily deliveries will be added to the daily task sheet. For assistance in evaluating the potential for substituting grains and by-products in place of hay or growing forages, visit with your local county Extension agent.