

Reduce Forage Waste in Beef Cow Wintering Programs

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Since last fall, weather has created perfect conditions for many outfits to have a lot of poor-quality roughage they will need to feed over the winter. For beef cow nutrition programs, this is probably not a big problem, so long as outfits know what they are feeding and are willing to balance the ration to accommodate the roughage component of the diet.

Whatever roughage or combination of roughages you are working with, the first thing you need to do is have it quality-tested so you know where the gaps in nutrition are. The roughage quality really doesn't matter as long as you can identify the nutrients available and adjust other components of the ration accordingly.

Let's start with grass, grass-mix hays, or stover; either dry or baleage. For the most part, we are looking for anything over high-50's for total digestible nutrients (TDN) and at least 9% crude protein (CP). This is ideally where you want to be for beef cows.

The most limiting nutrient in roughages this year is likely going to be CP. Supplementing a pound or two of protein through a lick tub, cake, or natural protein by-products like distiller's grains is probably the best and cheapest option. If your roughage pile turns out to be low in TDN, supplement with 3-5 lbs of distiller's grains or corn; whichever is the better value at the time. If it is low on both TDN and CP, 3-5 lbs of distiller's grains will balance the roughage component of the diet.

It is likely a lot of sorghum, sorghum/sudangrass, millet, oat and rye silage that was not stored correctly. What to do with these types of silages is going to depend on individual situations, however, here are a few general guidelines. The easiest solution will be to mix poor-quality silage into other ingredients in a mixed ration. This will solve most of the problems associated with this kind of roughage. It is ideal to keep the silage to ~50% of the mixed diet. If you need to mix in more than 50%, it might be a good idea to have a sample of the mixed diet tested to make sure you are covering all of the bases.

If mixing feed components is not feasible, you will have to look at supplementation of ingredients to balance the diet. This is where the recipe becomes very individualistic. For some, a simple lick tub might be sufficient; for others it may take multiple supplemental ingredients to make it balance.

One thing that will be difficult to salvage is moldy and spoiled feed (and there is likely to be a lot of it this year). Most molds in hay and baleage are harmless and likely not worrisome unless they are excessive. There are, however, certain types of mold that are not harmless and can cause a variety of problems in beef cows, ranging from respiratory to reproductive issues.

If you have a roughage pile with a lot of mold, it is probably worth the hassle to have it tested. The same goes for wet feeds. You can mix some bad silage into the diet and likely never have issues. But if a majority of the diet is silage, most of which is moldy or rotten, the risks increase exponentially. Figuring out exactly what is in the feed is a lot easier and cheaper than dealing with problems they can create.