

Managing More Cows on Less Grass

Partial-confinement systems for cows an option when grass is unavailable.

Story & photo by **Troy Smith**, field editor

Why would cow folk accustomed to maintaining their breeding herds on range and pasture consider keeping cows in confinement? According to University of Nebraska Cow-Calf and Range Specialist Karla Jenkins, drought may be the reason. It might be because conversion to crop production or other uses has limited the availability of grazing land. It could

be because pasture rents have become expensive.

In a presentation delivered during the 24th Range Beef Cow Symposium in November, Jenkins said feeding cows in confinement, at least part of the time, may be a way to expand herd numbers and bring more family members into an operation. Whatever the reason or reasons, Jenkins said managing cows in confinement can work.

Perhaps most appealing is a partial-confinement system in which the breeding herd is fed in confinement for part of the year, and range and pasture is utilized strategically at times when grass is most nutritious. Alternatively, a management system could winter-graze cows on cornstalks or other crop residues and confine cows in the summer. Alternatives to confinement in a typical feedlot setting include feeding the herd in a relatively small sacrifice pasture or the corners of pivot-irrigation systems.

If producers do choose to manage cows in confinement, Jenkins recommended limit-feeding the animals. She warned that letting

cows eat all they want is not economical. Rather, cows should be fed rations that meet their nutritional requirements, with dry-

matter intake limited to no less than 2% of body weight.

“A limit-fed ration must contain energy-dense ingredients, such as grain byproducts, which can be mixed with low-quality forages,” Jenkins emphasized, noting how baled cornstalks and other

crop residues, straw and low-quality hay can be cost-effective ration ingredients.

“But producers must know the nutrient content of the feed ingredients, and they must understand the nutrient requirements of their cows. Requirements change with stage of production and reproduction, so the diet must be manipulated by adjusting ingredients or the amount of ration fed,” Jenkins cautioned. When balancing rations incorporating byproduct feedstuffs, she advised producers to use nutrient values produced by universities for feeding trials.

Producers were advised to allow ample bunk space, particularly if confined cows have calves at side. Jenkins said calves often start sampling feed early, and ration amounts must be adjusted as they begin consuming feed. Calves must also have easy access to water, as milk consumption alone is not sufficient for rumen development in young animals.

As part of the *Angus Journal's* full meeting coverage, you can listen to Karla Jenkins' presentation at <http://bit.ly/1mjaPgz>.



▶ If producers do choose to manage cows in confinement, Jenkins recommended limit-feeding the animals. She warned that letting cows eat all they want is not economical.

Fig. 1: Total daily nutrients of common byproducts and forages

Ingredient ¹	TDN (% dry matter)
Corn distillers' grains (wet, dry, modified) and solubles	108
Sugar beet pulp	90
Soyhulls	70
Synergy	105
Corn gluten feed	100
Midds	75
Corn	83
Wheat straw/cornstalks	43
Meadow hay	57

¹Feeding trials reported in *Nebraska Beef Report* 1987, p. 4; 1998, p. 34; 1993, p. 46; midds data from KSU Research Report.

Editor's Note: This summary is part of the *Angus Journal's* online coverage of the 2015 Range Beef Cow Symposium, which was hosted Nov. 17-19, 2015, in Loveland, Colo. For additional coverage, to review this presentation's PowerPoint or to listen to the presentation, visit the Newsroom at www.rangebeefcow.com. The *Angus Journal's* coverage of the event is made possible through collaboration with the event committee and sponsorship of LiveAuctions.tv. Troy Smith is a cattleman and freelance writer from Sargent, Neb.