



Ridin' Herd

by Rick Rasby, Extension beef specialist, University of Nebraska

Corn market says we must do more with forages

High corn prices have signaled that cow-calf producers must do more with forages. With the national beef cow herd shrinking, the availability of pasture and range should increase, causing a decrease in costs. However, the increase in corn price and the widespread drought in the southern United States have put pressure on forage resources. It will be interesting, to say the least, to see how this situation plays out. In the short term, forages — both pastureland and harvested forages — will be expensive.

Factors affecting role, price of forages

What a difference a few years makes. The national cow herd has continually decreased for the last 10 or so years. This would seem to have put cow-calf producers in the driver's seat because feedlots are overbuilt and there is great competition for calves. CattleFax indicates this year will post the lowest feeder-calf inventory since 1950. Weaned calf prices have increased, but returns to the cow-calf enterprise have decreased. As calf prices have increased, so have input costs.

Pasture prices have increased even though cow herd numbers nationally have decreased. In our area, the increase in pasture price has followed corn prices. In addition, there has been more outside investment in land, which has increased pasture prices. Tillable pastureland has been plowed and designated for corn or soybean production. This has put some pressure on pasture costs.

With high corn prices, feedlot managers are reluctant to feed high-dollar corn for an extended period. It appears feedlot managers

are more interested in feeding yearlings compared to calf-feds. Feedlots are interested in putting on a cheaper gain by grazing calves for a period of time before they enter the feedlot. This has put more pressure on pasture availability, resulting in an increase in pasture costs. With high corn prices, the role of forages in the feedlot industry will increase. This would not only include spring/summer forages, but also winter forages, which include crop residues and stockpiled summer pasture.

I thought I would never live to see the day cows in Nebraska could be wintered more cheaply than they could be summered. Crop residues are great assets for our cow-calf producers. In addition, some of our calf backgrounders are economically growing calves on crop residue and ethanol byproducts. They are using research to "program" supplement calves on corn residue for a targeted rate of gain.

Economics has changed the role of forages in the beef cattle industry. Bottom line, cow-

calf producers will need to continue to push the pencil to keep production costs, especially feed costs, low. Forages, especially grazed forages, will be the most economical feed resource to increase profit potential.

Hay feeding frequency, amount

Hay loss and waste can be reduced by daily feeding hay according to dietary needs. Compared to feeding a several-day supply each time hay is provided, daily feeding will force livestock to eat hay they might otherwise refuse, overconsume, trample and waste. Cattle will waste less hay when the amount fed is limited to what is needed in a single day. One-fourth more hay is needed when a four-day supply of hay is fed with free access than when a one-day supply is fed.

Excessive hay consumption can be a major problem when large hay packages are fed without restriction. A dry, pregnant cow can eat up to 15%-20% more hay than she needs when allowed free access to good-quality hay. A 1,200-pound (lb.) dry cow that is consuming 27 lb. daily as is, with free access to the forage, could consume 31 lb. per day. This can amount to almost 500 lb. per cow during a four-month feeding period for spring-calving cows. A 100-cow herd may overconsume 24 tons of hay if the cows have free access to the hay. This is in addition to the extra needed to replace wasted hay when fed free access.

Dry-matter losses can occur when handling hay from field to feeding. By the time the hay is fed, losses can be substantial, and can essentially increase the amount of production needed from the original standing crop by 35%. By effectively controlling the amount of hay lost and wasted during harvest, storage and feeding, production costs can be reduced and making hay can be more profitable.

Final thoughts

Profit potential in the cow-calf enterprise will continue to be a challenge as input costs continue to rise. In these challenging times, there will be producers who will make a lot of money because they have been planning for these situations for a long time. They have implemented management strategies that have optimized how they use the forage resources in a sustainable and responsible manner with less of a reliance on cereal grains. \$2-per-bushel corn has covered up poor use and management of forage resources in the cattle enterprise.

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