



Beef Logic

► by R.A. "Bob" Long

Feeding patterns can make a difference

Discussions of beef cattle nutrition usually deal with the nutrient requirements of various ages and classes of beef cattle and how best to meet those needs. However, once the diet for a particular group of cattle has been selected, the time, place, frequency and method of feeding become important management decisions.

Avoid routine

Cattle on pasture, particularly dormant winter pasture, usually receive supplemental feed. A common practice is to select a permanent feeding site that is convenient and accessible, and to feed the cattle there at the same time every day.

The herd quickly learns to anticipate this schedule and spends considerable time on or near this location waiting for the feed truck. This results in reduced forage intake due to less time spent grazing. The daily herd congregation also causes severe trampling of the feed ground and overgrazing of the surrounding pasture, allowing erosion and weed invasion.

Therefore, it is desirable to alternate the time and place of feeding.

The cattle quickly associate the sound of the feed truck and/or its horn with "dinner time" and arrive in a hurry. The result is increased forage consumption and more uniform grazing of the entire pasture.

The location of salt and mineral supplements can also help induce cattle to

graze a pasture more uniformly. Instead of having a permanent location for a mineral feeder, move it frequently. Better still, provide several feeders at well-distributed locations. Remember, of course, to check each frequently and to provide fresh mineral as needed.

Timing

After receiving supplemental feed, cattle on pasture tend to be satisfied and may not graze for a considerable time. Therefore, the

time of day when the supplement is fed can affect forage intake.

During cold weather cattle tend to graze during the warmer daylight hours. If fed late in the day the night is spent digesting the feed, and the herd grazes during the daylight hours.

In summer the procedure should be reversed. Supplement provided in hot weather should be fed early in the day before the cattle "shade up." Then they will be ready to graze in the cool of the evening.

Time of feeding, both on pasture and in the drylot, can influence the time when cows

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give birth. A demanding time for herdsmen is during the calving season, when cows must be checked day and night in order to be given assistance if needed.

Some time ago a breeder in Manitoba, Canada, observed that the time of feeding could be used to manipulate the time of day when the majority of a cow herd calves. His observation was confirmed by researchers in Canada and the United States.

For example, scientists at Iowa State University (ISU) reported that when cows were fed late (8-10 p.m.), 85% went into labor during the daylight hours, while only 49% of cows fed in the morning calved during the day. To be effective, the late feeding schedule should be initiated about two weeks before the cows are to begin calving.

Feeding frequency

Frequency of feeding is also worth consideration. Cow herds being wintered on dormant pasture and fed protein supplement do equally well when receiving the same total amount of supplement every other day. For example, if cows are receiving 3 pounds (lb.) of range cubes per head per day, 6 lb. fed every other day will do as well and will save time and labor. The only disadvantage is a failure to check on the general welfare of the cattle on the off day, which some herd managers will not accept. Feeding less frequently than every other day is asking for trouble.

Frequency of feeding is also a point for discussion when feeding high-energy diets to weanling bulls on a postweaning gain test or steers being fed for harvest. Some feeders prefer to feed once a day in amounts the cattle will clean up in a 24-hour period. Others insist that feeding smaller amounts twice or even three times daily is best.

When cattle are self-fed, there is a great deal of variation in the consumption patterns of individual animals. Within the same pen, some cattle will eat a large quantity only once or twice a day, while others will consume small amounts eight or 10 times. Further, these feeding patterns tend to remain constant throughout a feeding period of as much as 150 days. Fortunately this variation in feeding preferences has little effect on total daily consumption, rate of gain or feed efficiency.

Of course, the single most important item is to meet the nutrient requirements of the sex, age and class of cattle in question as cheaply as possible.

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