

For Immediate Release

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Getting' Cattle to Grass

By Gene Schmitz, MU Extension Livestock Specialist

It is about 200 days until mid-April 2013 when producers can normally expect spring green-up in pastures. Recent rains have provided some relief from drought conditions and many pastures are producing some fall growth. But there will not be an overabundance of fall pasture produced in Missouri this year. In fact, it may be best in the long run to continue feeding hay or silage for a few weeks and allow pastures to more fully recover from drought stress before grazing fall growth.

The big question is how to provide feed to get cattle from now to spring 2013. The answers aren't particularly pleasant to hear, since forage and supplements are in high demand and low supply which equals high cost. There are a few management things producers can do to lower feed use during the upcoming months.

An inventory of feed supplies is a good place to start. Compare feed supply to the number of animals you need to feed during the winter. If feed is short, either increase feed supply or reduce demand.

Feed demand can be reduced in a variety of ways. Reduce the nutrient demand of beef cows by weaning calves. This saves about 0.5 pound of feed per hundred pounds of cow weight. Pregnancy test and sell open cows to reduce animal numbers. Cull the herd aggressively. Feed is expensive and you don't want to keep an animal that doesn't pay its' way or that makes you mad every time you look at it. Reducing feed waste is another strategy to stretch limited feed supplies. If feeding hay in bale rings, restrict time cattle have hay access to 8 to 12 hours per day. You need to have pretty good quality hay for this to work, and carefully monitor body condition of the cattle.

Corn stalks should be tested for nutrient content and nitrate concentration. If nitrates are above 2,500 parts per million, stalks need to be restricted to 50% or less of the diet. Corn stalks are also low in energy and protein, so these nutrients need to be supplied through either high quality hay or grain / grain by-product supplements. There may be considerable waste with corn stalk bales, so be sure to feed accordingly.

If available, corn silage is an excellent feed. It will need to be limit fed, or else cattle may get too fat. Silage may also contain high nitrate levels, so be sure to test before feeding.

Hay purchases should be based on bale weight, bale moisture, and bale nutrient content. Bale weight is also important to know in case some feeds contain high levels of nitrate and must be limit fed.

Some pastures have regrowth containing Johnsongrass. This is a plant that is a nitrate accumulator and may also contain prussic acid. Johnsongrass should be approximately 18 inches tall before grazing in order to reduce the chance of prussic acid poisoning. Frost damage will also cause an increase in prussic acid in johnsongrass, so be sure to pull cattle out of pastures containing johnsongrass after the first frost. Once the plants are dead, they can be safely grazed. This is usually a week to 10 days after a killing frost. It may be best in the long run to not graze fall growth until later in the year. This allows the plants to recover from some of the stresses they have endured this year and helps you avoid potential toxic prussic acid problems.

This will be an unusual winter to feed livestock. If you have questions or concerns about your winter feeding program, contact me at the Extension Center in Warsaw at (660) 438-5012 or by e-mail at schmitze@missouri.edu. University of Missouri Extension is an equal opportunity / ADA institution.