



**Burke
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More on feeding cows

A recent article generated a number of emails, a couple of which criticized me for not “feeding” cows. I hope most of you see me as a strong advocate for good care of our animals.

Admittedly, I often encourage readers to replace “fed feed” with “grazed feed” to the extent possible. I’ve further suggested that what is possible is more than many of us have thought. We shouldn’t do work that the cows can do for themselves.

I also think that most of us want our ranches to be profitable. In almost all cases, one of the biggest drivers of profitability is replacing fed feed with grazed feed.

The only situation where you can afford to put a machine between the cow and her feed source is when the feed is a low-cost byproduct. Then you must wonder that if the byproduct was straw or baled cornstalks, would it have been more valuable left on the land to build soil and reduce erosion, or even be grazed by the animal to leave manure on the land.

Something, somewhere becomes less efficient when we have machines do work that a cow can do for herself.

Concerning animal well-being, I’ve said cows should be maintained in adequate body condition. Cows calving in late April or May can get by with a little less body condition score (BCS) in winter than those

calving in February or March.

However, the recommendations we often see are to have cows in a BCS 5, and heifers in BCS 6, at calving. A heifer with a BCS 5 will be healthy, but you can’t expect the same breed-back as you would if she were in BCS 6.

If supplement, or even full feed, is required for a time to maintain body condition, you should do it. However, if that type of feeding is the rule rather than the exception, you might ask if the enterprise matches your environment, or if your cows fit your environment. You must remember there are many fellow ranchers (competitors) who aren’t feeding their cows.

I visited Sieben Livestock near Helena, Mont., in mid-March, where the mature cows had been fed only a little hay to make the grazeable feed last until spring’s green-up. The cows ranged from BCS 5 to a little higher than BCS 6. They were happy, content and obviously well cared for.

The feed they were grazing had been stockpiled for the entire growing season to ensure its availability for winter grazing. The cows were obviously quite well-adapted to the area and the management approach. Weaned calf crop percentages and pregnancy rates on the cows are in the 90s.

There are a few people in our business who believe in a “no input” approach, and I’ve seen several who

have been successful in adapting livestock and their management to that approach. However, I personally prefer a “low input” approach.

I think there is good, even excellent, payback to taking the rough edges off the natural environment. There are at least a few days each year that can be real tough on the best of cattle, and I like to help them through those times. Then there are deep, crusted snows and droughts that come occasionally. We must have a contingency plan for those events, which will usually entail some feeding.

Here are my recommended steps:

- Decide if it’s economically feasible to winter cows in your area.
- Reduce haying, thus making more winter graze available.
- Lengthen the grazing season until you perhaps can graze all winter.
- Pay close attention to the younger animals. They should be grazed separately from mature cows since they usually require more supplement and perhaps need some “fed” feed.
- Cull any cow that doesn’t fit this management.
- Buy the right bulls. ■

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