

Beef Talk: Feel good by feeding some alfalfa

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Alfalfa is an excellent choice to feed as a supplement to beef cows that are later in their pregnancy. Seldom do we think of hay as being a supplement, but the right high-quality forage, such as alfalfa, certainly can be fed as a supplement to the lower-quality forages generally

available for the main ration of a beef cow.

The benefit of a balanced ration through appropriate supplementation certainly is positive to the management of beef cows. Of course, the previous year's forage production is today's feed menu.

We feed what we produced during the last growing season.

A good indication of last year's forage success is the number of trucks seen hauling hay. In all honesty, I have not seen very many loads of hay on the highways I have been traveling, so apparently last year's forage production was adequate to meet the needs of the herd. There are still parts of the country that are very dry, but we all know the wet/dry cycle never ends.

When one sees a load of hay traveling down the highway, one cannot help but ponder its destination. If the load is good hay, one even considers the wish that the load was going to one's own ranch, particularly if the load is a second or third cutting of alfalfa. Although oftentimes a dessert for older beef cows, alfalfa certainly is a treasured forage for those that raise the four-legged critters.

Not just for dairy cows or sheep

The dairy business often is surrounded by alfalfa production opportunities. However, I certainly have not forgotten my sheep background and the value alfalfa has for ewes. Starting early in my graduate career, the late Dr. Whiteman fed sheep for years with very few problems.

"It was the alfalfa," he always would say. Having a rather strong sheep background and having taught many producers how to raise sheep, I adopted the same principle. If in doubt, give the ewe a cake of alfalfa. That cake, in terms of a herd, would be a pound per head prior to lambing. The old saying that a sick sheep is a dead sheep never held true when the ration was right and that cake of alfalfa was available.

You might be asking why in the world beef producers would need to know something about feeding sheep. Well, grandpa always said that the sheep get the hay first, cows second and horses third. In fact, if the truth be told, we generally couldn't find the horses. They were camped somewhere enjoying winter because they had ample roughage, so the pickings were good.

Now back to the cattle pens. Cows need to be fed and Whiteman's sheep philosophies do have a point. In a roundabout way, the well-being of ruminants (cows, sheep and the many other four-stomached, four-legged and four-hoofed animals) comes down to having a mix of roughages available.

During the summer months, abundant green grass usually is available, and some of that green grass is preserved for use during the winter months. The key to having good nutrition is the word "green." As cattle are confined and the availability of forage becomes either physically restrictive or cost-prohibitive, the green tends to disappear out of the ration.

More and more feed is delivered,

but it is brown, which is the color of mature, older forage. The feed also could be gold, which is the color of straw and many other grain supplements.

All rations need to be balanced, so it is important that the correct supplements are added under the advice of a good nutritionist. Adding some alfalfa hay to a low-quality feed base will make supplementing the ration easier.

The next time you see a load of alfalfa going down the road by truck, don't be so quick to dismiss the hay as dairy feed. You also might want to think twice and have some delivered to your place.

The price often seems high, but one is not going to do an all-you-can-eat buffet of alfalfa. For a ewe, a pound of alfalfa a day helps, and the same is true for a cow. Five to seven pounds of alfalfa would be a great starting point for any nutritionist to start calculating a ration. Unfortunately, the alfalfa is not always available. However, the feed dealer may have some alfalfa-based supplements or cubes that would help.

The point is simple: The world is better off with a mix of things, and so are the cows. Having some variety helps to cover up the things one feed may be lacking. In the cow business, we tend to start feeding a stack of hay, so the cows may get stuck eating out of that same haystack for a long time. This is unlike a feedlot where the calves get a totally mixed and balanced ration every day.

If the stack is brown or golden, with no evidence of well-preserved green plants, look for a supplement. The next time you see a load of alfalfa going down the road by truck, don't be so quick to dismiss the hay as dairy feed. You also might want to think twice, and have some delivered to your place.

May you find all your ear tags.

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