

# Read the Label

*Getting your money's worth out of purchased feed requires more than just comparing protein levels on the tag.*

by **SHARLA ISHMAEL**

It's one thing to read the tag on a bag of feed; it's another thing to understand what the tag says — and, more importantly, what it doesn't say. With so much damage done by the 2011 drought and no end in sight,

producers need to get the most bang for every buck spent on feed.

For example, let's compare two different brands of breeder cubes. Both feed tags list 20% crude protein (CP) in the guaranteed analysis at the top of the tag. One is priced higher. Which is the better buy

for fall-calving cows? Or growing replacement heifers?

While quality of protein may not be as vital in a beef operation as other species, wouldn't you prefer to know something about quality and digestibility of the protein you're feeding?

"Crude protein is something to look at; however, the quality of protein available to animals varies greatly," explains Joe Fuller, a 17-year veteran of the feed industry and field sales leader for Land O'Lakes Purina Feed. "Feed tags can be misleading. The label states a minimum standard, but manufacturers can use different ingredients to cheapen the formulation.

"A cube tagged 20% protein could actually have higher protein levels (if input costs were such that it was cheaper for the manufacturer to formulate a higher percent crude protein) or you could have a product that only has digestible protein of 12% to 14%," Fuller says. "Labels give you a good framework, but they don't tell the whole story."

## What is guaranteed on a feed tag

While a feed tag may not tell you everything you need to know, it's definitely worth your time to take a minute and look it over. Some of the information on the label is mandated by state regulations and national standards. Depending on which state you live in, certain ingredients must be guaranteed on the label (which nutrients are required to be listed varies by state).

For example, most feed tags will have a "Guaranteed Analysis" section at the top of the label outlining maximums and minimums of crude protein, crude fat, crude fiber, calcium, phosphorous, salt, etc. In Texas, feed and fertilizer investigators from the Office of the Texas State Chemist conduct spot checks on finished products to ensure what's in a bag lives up to its label. (You can learn more about commercial feed regulations in Texas at <http://otsweb.tamu.edu/Larws/FeedLaws.aspx>.)

Also required is a lot or batch number on the label. If you have any problems with feed, such as funny smells, wrong ingredients, etc., you can contact the manufacturer, who should be able to identify when and

where the feed was made. If there were to be any recalls, you would also use that batch number to determine if your feed was in the recall.

What doesn't the Guaranteed Analysis tell you? It doesn't give you any information about dry matter, energy content or quality of ingredients. For example, as the use of byproducts has evolved, understanding what the percent crude fiber number on a feed tag signifies is more complicated than it used to be. Consider comments by Ron Gill on *RanchTV.org*, a Texas AgriLife Extension website:

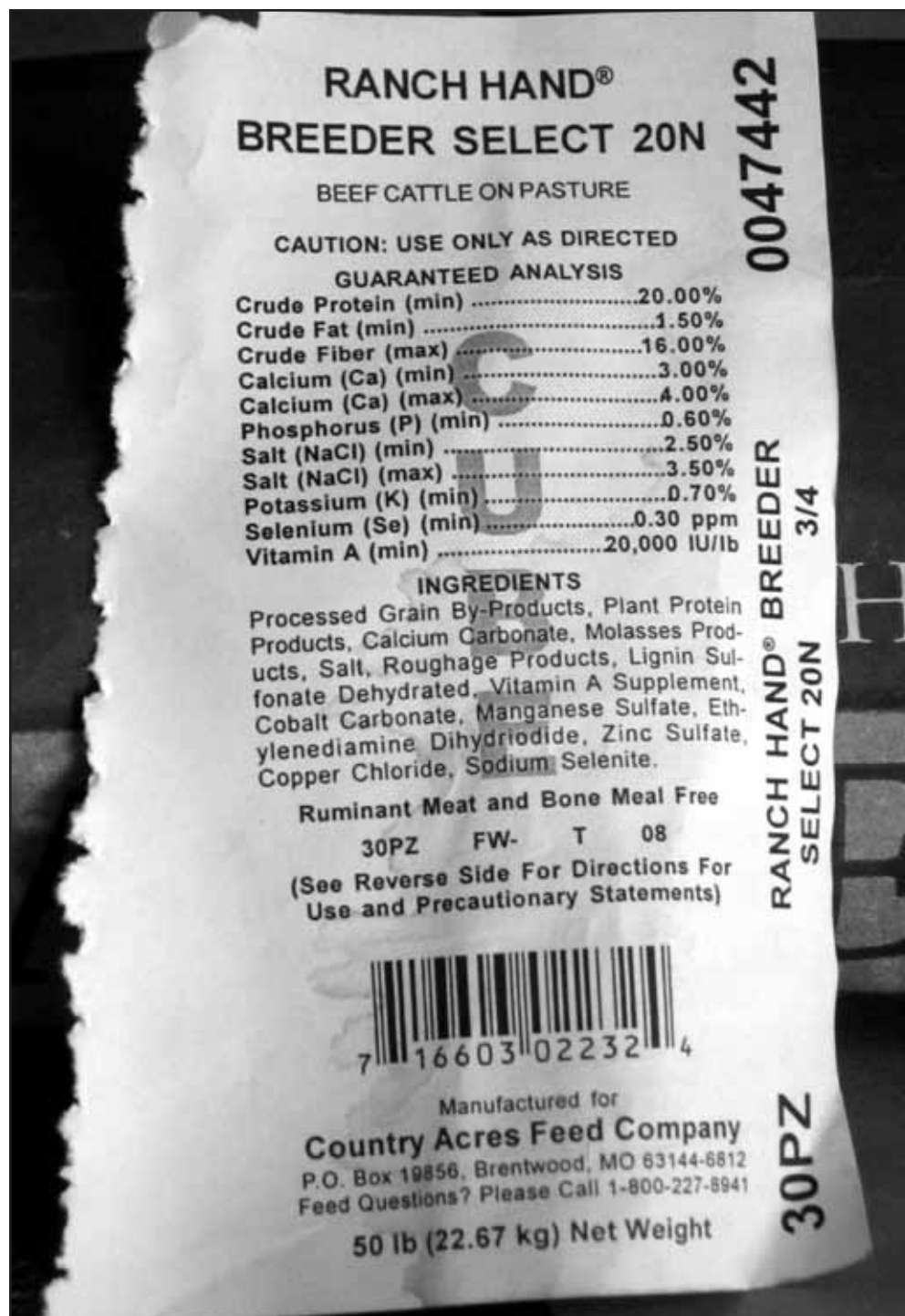
"It's somewhat confusing now because of wheat midds and soybean hulls that have a fiber content that is not just indigestible fiber. Once we look at fiber content on a feed, we also have to refer to the ingredients to get a better understanding of what that's going to mean from an energy standpoint. Back before we used to use a lot of these byproduct feeds — and corn was the main source of energy — the fiber content was a really good indicator of overall energy value of that feed.

"Prior to the use of midds and soybean hulls, feeds that had 8% to 10% crude fiber (CF) were considered high-quality energy cubes, and those with 15% to 20% CF were considered fairly poor sources of energy. With the inclusion of these high-digestible fiber feedstuffs, such as midds and hulls, the energy value is going to be higher than what the fiber level might indicate based on past rules of thumb.

"Other coproducts that can be used when manufacturing feed, such as dried distillers' grains (DDGs), also add additional energy due to the higher fat content of these products," Gill adds.

## Ingredients: not necessarily individual

The next section on a feed label is generally a list of ingredients, but again, that can be confusing. Feed companies can choose whether to list individual ingredients (corn, alfalfa, etc.) or collective categories of ingredients (plant protein products, roughage products, etc.). Manufacturers can use collective terms like "grain products" because they are constantly changing formulations based on the dynamic



Feed labels' guaranteed analysis doesn't tell you about dry matter, energy content or quality of ingredients. Joe Fuller, field sales leader for Land O'Lakes Purina Feed says, "Feed tags just don't tell you the whole story. They are a tool, but that's all."

prices of feedstuffs. Otherwise, they would have to issue a different label each time they changed the formula. Companies also use this type of phrasing to protect proprietary formulas.

So, what does something like “plant protein products” really mean? It could be anything from algae meal to soy protein concentrate to yeast to cottonseed meal and a long list of other appropriate products. “Roughage products” could mean anything from beet pulp to rice hulls to barley mill byproduct to peanut hulls, as just a few examples. So, you can see how different two bags of feed with similar labels could possibly be, with endless combinations of ingredients in the mix.

However, even if you can determine the individual ingredients used in a ration, there can still be a wide variety in the quality of those ingredients.

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*— Joe Fuller*

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Fuller explains, “For example, Land O’ Lakes Purina takes samples of every load (of raw ingredients) that comes in. We test samples of every ingredient every day. You may have 100,000 samples of soybean meal that average 44% protein, but within the samples you can see a variation of 36% protein to 50% protein.

“So, our formulation changes based on both the quality and the protein content of the ingredients coming into the feed plant. As ingredients come in, we alter the formula slightly to meet the tag specifications,” Fuller adds.

“It comes down to can you trust the company and its research behind the products. Ultimately, it comes down to the performance of the product.”

Minerals are another area where it can pay a producer to look for the devil in the details. As an illustration, take two bags of feed where Feed A has 7,500 ppm zinc oxide and Feed B has 2,500 ppm zinc sulfate. Just looking at the tag you would think Feed A has more zinc for your animals.

“The bioavailability of the sulfate product is higher than the oxide product, but the tag doesn’t tell you any of that,” Fuller says. “Even if the tag lists both forms, oxide and sulfate, you don’t know whether the cheaper oxide was used or not. Feed tags just don’t tell you the whole story. They are a tool, but that’s all.”

### **Seriously, read the directions**

Not reading the label can get you into trouble. For one thing, there are warnings about feeds that should not be fed to certain classes of livestock. They

can be fatal, particularly with horses. And if a feed is medicated, some Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines call for producers to keep records of that for up to three years.

Not reading the directions could cost you money. Here’s how. A feed tag will give you feeding directions — in general how much to feed and how often. It is possible that a feed with a higher price per

bag will actually cost you less money if you can feed less of it or feed it less often because it’s made with higher-quality ingredients.

The funny thing is, in researching this topic, several nutritionists mentioned the fact that men don’t like to read instructions. Perhaps your wife might be so kind as to take a look at the feed tag for you. Most women (at least if they are

like me) have spent a lifetime deciphering labels on the food we eat, depending on what diet we’re on at the time. Use caution, however, when asking for this assistance. Any “smart” comments about her diet may mean you’ll be opening your own gates and reading your own labels for a long time.

