

Livestock Farmers Face Long Winter

Story by
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Tight feed supplies mean cattle producers will have to be careful managers this winter to keep their animals in good

condition to ensure healthy calves and rebreeding in the spring.

"I have some real concern for our cattle producers in that late winter is probably going to be an ugly time for us," says Roy Burris, beef cattle specialist with

the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture. "It's probably going to cost us 50% more to winter cattle this year than it normally does."

If producers do not meet the nutritional needs of their cows, it will not only affect

the 2008 calf crop but also the 2009 crop, because many of the cows in poor condition will not rebreed. Cattle with body condition scores (BCS) of 5 (on a 9-point scale) have rebreeding rates in the 90 percentile, while those with scores of 3 to 4 are only in the 51-76 percentile.

"This could have a far-reaching effect if producers don't take proper care of their cattle," Burris says. "A lot of them will take good care of their herds, but some of them won't."

Burris is cautioning producers about the high price and low quality of some hay being offered on the market, including hay from ground enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and baled cornstalks. These will provide little nutritional value for cattle and will result in cattle losing weight, having weak calves and reducing their chances of rebreeding.

"I'm scared to death some producers are going to depend on this poor-quality hay, and it's going to mean problems in the calving season," he says.

There's nothing wrong with buying hay, if it is good hay, Burris says, but buying poor hay at high prices only adds to producers' expenses without improving their feed supply. Cattle won't compensate for poor-quality hay by eating more of it; they will eat less. In order to keep cattle in good condition on poor hay it will mean supplementing with other feed ingredients and supplementing a lot.

"Cattle don't have a hay requirement; they have a nutrient requirement," he says. So, the key thing for farmers is to test the hay to know its quality and then feed a balanced ration.

Not all hay is of poor quality. Cattle will consume good-quality hay and won't need as much supplementation, but the state's hay crop was reduced substantially because of a spring freeze followed by drought. So producers need to decide what supplements they will need, and in what amounts, in order to stretch their hay supply through the winter. Some farmers also may have to reduce their herd size.

Instead of buying poor-quality hay, producers would be better off evaluating their cattle, selling some of their poorer-performing animals and stretching what hay they have, Burris says. This will allow them to keep their remaining cattle in better condition and increase a cow's chances of delivering a healthy calf and rebreeding this spring.

"With proper management, we can get through this winter," Burris says.



Editor's Note: Laura Skillman is the news and information section leader of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture.