

LIVESTOCK

Planning for winter feeding becomes complicated in 2013

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Typically, planning a winter feeding program has been fairly straightforward: estimate the number of cattle to be wintered, the amount of standing

forage that will be available and how much hay is needed to get to spring grass. Then a least-cost supplement (if needed) to fill in nutritional gaps was easily identified. It's still timely in August to start the planning process, but it may be a little more complicated in 2013 than usual.

Many producers haven't restocked to pre-drought cow numbers, and the welcomed rains this spring and summer throughout most of the Southern Great Plains region have resulted in excess forage. When frost arrives this fall, there will be abundant standing forage in many areas, but the quality will be more extreme than we typically encounter. Several factors are involved.

To begin with, some pastures in Texas and Oklahoma were lightly grazed or completely deferred with large amounts of low-quality residue left from ryegrass and other cool-season annuals that proliferated into early summer. Some producers hayed the winter annuals to release the warm-season perennials underneath, and

that hay quality usually ranges from poor to average. Due to reduced stocking rates and low grazing pressure this summer, many warm-season perennial pastures will go into the winter in a patch-grazed condition with variable qualities of standing forage within the same paddock. These conditions have been a challenge to grazing management this growing season. The results will also make it more difficult to figure out supplementation: when to begin, what kind and how much.

Historically, spring-calving cows are allowed to selectively graze standing forage after weaning and are able to meet their protein and energy requirements without any supplement. At some point, protein in the standing forage becomes limiting and we routinely supply a high-protein supplement that enables the cows to meet energy needs from the remaining excess forage before going to hay. Once hay feeding begins, any needed supplement is provided based on a nutritional analysis of the hay. Historically, when only protein is needed,

supplements with the highest level of protein have usually been the most economical on a cost per pound of protein basis.

Here are a couple of differences I see between this fall and winter compared to the pre-drought years. First, as stated above, many producers will go into the fall and winter with more excess forage than ever before. With lower stocking rates, the cows could selectively graze a diet with adequate protein and energy to meet their needs longer into the winter. That's a good thing, but there may still be abundant quantity available when the forage quality drops below adequate and supplementation is needed. To estimate when supplementation is needed, see *Here's A New Kind of 'B.S.' Degree* at <http://www.noble.org/ag/pasture/bsdegree/>.

Second, the cost per pound of protein in supplement choices may not favor the highest analysis this year. At this writing in early July 2013, I priced the following supplement choices to show this point (Table 1). ▶

Table 1

Supplement	Percent Protein	Price Per Ton	Price Per Pound of Protein
Cottonseed meal	41%	\$450	\$0.55
38% Cubes	38%	\$390	\$0.51
Dried distillers grains	27%	\$280	\$0.52
Alfalfa hay	17%	\$170	\$0.50

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You can see that the cottonseed meal, which is highest in protein of these supplements, is also the highest cost per pound of protein. Keep in

mind that these prices will change between now and fall – your prices may be different and no labor or storage factors were considered. In summary,

now is the time to begin planning your winter feeding program, but historic assumptions may not apply in light of current conditions. ■