

Post Rock Answers
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Optimizing Forage Utilization Through Supplemental Protein

Are you looking for alternatives to get more performance out of your pasture? While there are many tactics for optimizing the tonnage of forage consumed, the option considered most often for fall and winter grazing is to incorporate a protein supplementation program. Supplemental protein can be the building blocks of a very successful fall and help protect your bottom line while making greater use of one of a cattle producers most valuable assets—grass.

For producers considering protein supplementation, I would stress the importance of drawing the line between supplementation and substitution. Substitution is the act of completely replacing the current nutrition plane and is very easy to do. When using distiller's grains, for example, it is not uncommon for producers to feed a little bit more on colder days or through a drier period. However, as we start feeding cattle more than their own requirements we cross the line and begin substituting, causing our livestock to instinctively rely more heavily on the feed truck and spend less time grazing and working for their nutrient requirements. When we get to this point, we are now leaving available forage ungrazed for the year and accordingly wasting a commodity, only to spend money on another one.

On the other hand, supplementing protein at a moderate rate will compensate for depleting forage quality as grass begins to turn colors and mature. We know that a lower quality forage also slows down rumen passage rate and, in turn, decreases dry matter intake. It only makes sense that adding protein back into the diet will enhance both of these measurable traits. With cattle reaching a more desirable DMI, they now have access to, and are consuming, much greater amounts of energy, the nutrient that is commonly delivered when substitution is in practice.

In this process we can utilize the mature, lower quality grass to meet their energy requirements at the cost of a few pounds of soybean meal or other supplement—which is significantly more cost effective than feeding higher amounts of hay, range cubes, or other feedstuffs early in the year. Thus, protein supplementation is not solely about prolonging our forage and allowing cattle to graze for as much of the year as possible, but rather about pushing our livestock to consume greater amounts of dry matter through grazing and meet their nutrient requirements without adding excessive costs to the producer.

In conclusion, using low amounts of a high protein supplement (36% CP or better) can be an effective means of management for maintaining body condition score, cow weight, and overall cost. Providing 1-2 pounds per day of a high protein supplement can allow greater utilization of grass while encouraging your cow herd to continue in their grazing nature and not rely on the feed truck. In addition, we can also reduce labor hours by spreading out the week's protein supplement into one or two feedings. In a study testing feeding intervals of two, four, and six days, feeding every four days led to the least weight loss amongst bred cows for the months of November through April. All the while having minimal effects on birth weight, breed back ability, and calf weaning weight. Protein supplementation programs will allow producers to feed, spend, and stress less throughout the fall and early winter grazing seasons. If you have

comments or questions, don't hesitate to contact me to look into a more efficient fall grazing program.

Sources

- Lalman, David "Supplementing Beef Cows"
<http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-1924/ANSI-3010web.pdf>

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