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Match Feed Quality to Requirement Needs

The more extended dry period has pastures looking parched and the combines starting to roll through fields to bring in the harvest. It is in these times that there are noticeable differences between cool season grass, warm season natives, harvested crop fields, summer annuals and some of the early planted winter cereals/cover crops. If there are visible differences, it only stands to reason that measurable differences in forage quality and quantity can be noted as well.

As the title of this article says, it's always good advice to assess feed quality and match resources to needs. Cattle producers should save their best feeds for when the cows' nutritional requirements are the greatest. That means feeding the best-quality feed after calving, when cows are lactating. Feed moderate-quality feeds in the period leading up to calving, and lower-quality feeds after weaning calves. Depending on the operation, you could be on either side of that equation now, or possibly dealing with all ends of the spectrum.

The period from calving to getting the cow bred back is the most critical time period that a cow faces in terms of nutritional demand. As the cow is lactating and preparing to rebreed this is also the most critical period to add supplements or additional feed to cow diets if necessary to meet the cow's requirements for energy, protein, vitamins and minerals. When feeding harvested feed following calving, the very best quality feed should be saved until that time. This is also true for the grazing animal, by moving animals to those fields/pastures/paddocks of higher quality and leaving lower quality options for later in the production cycle.

The second most critical time frame is the 60 days before calving as most of the fetal growth occurs in that period. Plus, it's very difficult to add condition once the cow starts lactating. Cows at that stage should get the second-best feed on hand. Carefully monitor to be sure that moderate quality feeds are meeting the cow needs. During the same time frame, checking vitamins A and E levels. Supplementing those two vitamins during that last 60 days of pregnancy, could have a nice impact helping the cow go through calving, providing better quality colostrum and assisting in successful breed-back.

The time to use poorer quality feeds is after calves are weaned and leading up to the 60 days before calving. It is at this period where cows in good condition, they can be pushed through on lower quality feeds. Remember though, if needing to add some body condition back to the cows, look at different, low-cost ways to add some weight at that time when requirements are the lowest. Remember too, that it can be more efficient to divide and manage cows by age, stage of production, body condition score or other factors that have similar nutrient requirements.

Another consideration that often comes up now is for feeds high in nitrates to be targeted in their use. Pregnant animals are susceptible to abortions from high-nitrate feeds. Whenever possible, target higher nitrate feeds use to non-pregnant animals, such as replacement heifers, stocker/finisher cattle or even cows following calving. It's critical that high-nitrate feeds be tested and then blended with other feeds to attain acceptable nitrate levels for the class of cattle being fed according to test results.

There never seems to be a year where overfeeding or mismatching nutrient demand to feed resources makes sense. Often, feed prices are just too high or cattle prices too low to get sloppy in feed management. While this looks to be a better year for the cow calf sector related to both those items, it's always best to analyze feedstuffs and balance diets to meet, but not exceed, nutrient requirements.