# Hay and Cows and Chaff and Stuff

*By Howell N. Wheaton*

Winter is just around the corner and it is time to winterize the water supply. I once again give thanks for the no-energy freeze proof (almost) waterers below my ponds. No more chopping ice on a zero day for me. Beef cows can 'take in" enough water to last for 24 hours, but prefer to drink several times each day. This is especially true for cows nursing calves that need to drink water 2 to 3 times a day.

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"The third rule of life – Everything you buy today is smaller, more expensive and not as good as it was yesterday." – Andy Rooney.

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The breeding season for fall calving herds is underway. Timed AI is now a successful and common procedure that is practiced in many herds. In my own experiences it has been more successful with mature cows than with virgin heifers. My consultant in these matters is Carl Newbrough and he agrees that a timed AI with heifers has lower conception rates than does older cows.

In the early days of timed AI there was some concern that timed AI cows had more embryonic and later pregnancy losses than cows bred on heat detection. However, later studies have found very little, or no differences between the groups. In most of those studies pregnancy losses averaged about 12 percent in both groups of cows.

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The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.

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The buzz words around cattle circles, both spoken and written center around the winter hay supply that is in short supply across the central, southern and southwestern part of beef cow country.

Whenever there is a feed shortage there is the likelihood that cows will become thin before winter and if a cow enters the winter season in a thin condition, i.e., body score of 5 or lower, it takes extra feed for her to regain weight and proper body functions. These cows often have trouble calving, have weak calves at birth, have longer postpartum intervals and lower pregnancy rates the following year. A body condition score (BCS) of 5 or higher is necessary for a cow to achieve normal reproduction rates.

If one's inventory of hay indicates there are more cows to feed than hay available there is a very short list of what to do. We have all heard hundreds of times – cull "ole so and so", and sell heifers and on and on. Well, after that has been done and the supply and demand for hay still does not match, what are the options? Most of them are costly and more labor intensive than what is normally expected to winter a cow herd.

Take inventory of the hay supply and cattle numbers.

Sort cattle into groups that match their nutritional needs. Most of us do this anyway, but this year an extra group or two may be needed to stretch the hay supply without sacrificing performance. Start by mentally sorting into the usual groups. Fall vs. winter-spring calvers, replacement heifers, first and second calf heifers, just weaned replacement heifers, older cows (and that ole favorite with excellent genetics, that you just could not make yourself cull). Some of these groups can be placed together to minimize labor and maximize feed usage. Make sure to provide plenty of bunk and hay rack space so that some of the younger and more timid critters have the opportunity to get their share of the daily ration.

The goal in all of this is to have all cattle in good condition with a BCS of at least 5 at calving and/or breeding time.

If you have trouble visualizing a body score of 5, think of me – my waist has a slight roll, my cheeks sag a bit and my chin is not as pointed as it used to be. I like to think of myself as a BCS 5, but perhaps I am nudging a 6 or so.

Reduce hay feeding wastage as not all hay racks are created equal and the conventional circles or rings do waste some hay because cows have the opportunity to pull hay form the bale, step back, drop it on the ground and then stomp on it. I still see a few operations that just set out a big bale without a hay ring of any kind, wasting at least 30 to 40 percent of the hay fed, unless you count some of it for its fertilizer value. There are a number of hay racks on the market that are more efficient in reducing wastes than those old time conventional rings.

Some cowboys use unrollers to feed big bales and they do have their place. Unrolling hay is one way to limit the amount of hay fed per day. The disadvantage of this method is unrolling more that the cattle will "clean up" in 20 or 25 minutes. One study suggested that unrolling was most efficient (in preventing waste) if cattle were fed twice each day and only enough was unrolled so that cattle could consume it in 20 minutes or less.

Unrolling is fine as long as the soil is dry but when snow, mud and ice make their appearance hay wastage increases rapidly and this feeding method becomes one of the more wasteful options. In addition, it requires a truck or a tractor, plus an operator to be out there every day come mud, ice or snow.

The ultimate in feeding without wastage is the tub grinder and mixer. These excel in mixing a rationed amount of hay and supplemental grain, but once again make sure to provide plenty of bunk space so that all cattle get their share of a limited ration.

A 1,250 lb gestating beef cow requires about 24lbs of dry matter (DM) each day to keep her rumen functioning properly and efficiently. From the 24 lbs of DM she needs approximately 14 lbs of total digestible nutrients (TDN) and about one lb of digestible protein to maintain her body weight and daily activities. After she calves her requirements increase dramatically and by the time the calf reaches 3 months of age the cow needs 30 plus lbs of DM, 18 lbs of TDN and her protein needs almost double to 1 3/4 to 2 lbs of DP. These are rules of thumb that are useful when calculating feed rations for beef cows. A growing replacement heifer needs almost as much feed as a mature cow, especially digestible protein.

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Feeding just enough hay to meet a cow's needs was done almost as a matter of course in the days before the advent of the big round bale. However, limited feeding of large bales

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