Do My Cows Need a Supplement this Winter

By Marty Morgan, Wise County Ag Extension Agent

Well if needed, we are all looking for the best supplement to get our cows through the winter without adding extra labor or breaking the bank.

First, if you have not tested your hay then how do you know what and how much to supplement. Get your hay tested! You might be pleasantly surprised that you need very little if any extra protein and energy for your cows this winter. If your hay test at least 8-10 percent protein and 54-58 percent energy (TDN) your good to go, and no use wasting money on expensive supplements of any kind except for a good mineral which you should be keeping out most of the year, regardless. You can adjust the pounds of hay fed per head based on the nutrient requirements for pounds of dry matter and the cow's stage of gestation. Of course, dry bred cows require less nutrients than a cow with a calf on her side. For example, depending on cow weight, on average a dry 1100-pound cow will need 22 lbs of dry matter/day and 1-1.5 lb of crude protein(CP) and 12-13 lbs of energy(TDN). Feeding 22 lbs of a hay testing 8% CP and 54%TDN, the hay will supply 1.76 lbs of CP and 12 lbs of energy, your good, no supplement needed. If that same cow were nursing a calf say 90 days postpartum, of course she would require more dry matter intake, approx. 32-34 lbs of DM/day, and her CP and TDN requirement will also increase to 2.5-3 lbs and 16-18lbs/day, respectively. Feeding 34 lbs of that same hay would deliver 2.72 lbs of CP and 18.36 lbs of TDN. Again, her requirements are being met by the 8% CP and 54% TDN hay. So, you see without testing your hay you don't have a clue if her daily nutrient requirements are being met, and how much to supplement if needed. Forage test are cheap and very useful in determining cattle nutrition levels in feedstuffs, and well worth the effort.

When I was in college my favorite subject was Animal Nutrition-Feeds and Feeding, and I had a good professor that was an X Army Ranger when he was a young man in the Army. He was tough, rude and downright arrogant, but he was a great teacher, and he knew his stuff when it came to Nutrition. He always said "you have to know what's in your feed, if you don't, you're losing". He was talking about all feedstuffs including forage. So do a simple forage analysis and know what's in your hay. Otherwise, you may be feeding an expensive supplement and wasting money, OR you may need to be feeding a supplement and cheating your cows.

One more piece of advice is when you do need a protein supplement, base your choice on the cost per pound of actual protein. For example, say a 20 percent cube cost $350 per ton bulk. One ton would equate to 400 lbs of actual protein (2000 X 20%), and the cost per pound of protein would be 87.5 cents ($350 divided by 400 lbs of protein). So, what would 38% cubes cost? One ton of 38% would have 760 pounds of actual protein (2000 X 38%) At a cost per ton of $500 bulk, these cubes would cost you around 66 cents ($500 divided by 760 lbs) per pound of protein. That's a savings of 21.5 cents per pound which equates to $430 per ton. These are estimates but you get the general idea that the lower protein feeds costs the least amount of money. If you don't have time or the equipment to feed bulk cubes and want something you can leave out in the pasture free choice, you might consider Protein tubs or blocks. Some folks like liquid feed, I don't. See my article "Are Protein Tubs Good for Cattle?.

Whatever you feed, whatever it cost, at least put the pencil to it and see where you can save money and still provide the best product possible to your cows.