



Beef Briefs

The Latest Information on Beef Cattle Nutrition



Surviving the Drought: Minimizing Hay Losses and Waste

By: Jack McCoubrey

Many of you experienced one of the worst droughts in recent memory. Hay supplies are short to non-existent. Here are some considerations for your cow herd for this fall/winter.

1. Pregnancy check cows and sell open and late bred cows to slaughter. Sell poor producers (MPPA under 90 and cows that had a very poor calf this year).
2. Consider not keeping heifer calves for replacements. Feed out or sell as feeder calves.
3. You could graze some cornstalks and see if you can rent your neighbour's stalk fields (be sure to watch for nitrates). The benefits to your neighbour's fields are:
 - a. Cows will eat corn grain/husks/leaves and turn it into organic matter quicker than without the cows "recycling" it.
 - b. Cows will clean up grass/weeds from fencerows and waterways.
 - c. Iowa State and Nebraska research shows no loss in yield to grazed cornstalk ground vs. not grazed. A 1200lb cow causes almost no compaction to the soil.
4. Consider baling cornstalks that you cannot graze. The ideal situation is to remove the chopper and just bale what comes out of the combine. You will need heavy duty pick-up teeth that are rubber mounted so



they have some give to them and won't break as easily. If you use a stalk shredder and bale the entire plant there is a possibility of nitrate toxicity. A safe idea would be to run a test for nitrate to be sure the feed is safe.

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5. Minimize buying expensive hay to "solve" your drought problem. Hay disappearance on a 1250lb cow can be up to 37lbs (16.8kg) of hay and may waste an additional 8-13lbs (3.63kg - 5.9kg) if cows are fed free choice from a typical round bale feeder. At \$220/tonne, that is 80 cents to \$1.30 wasted/cow/day.
6. Purdue research shows that if cows have access to round bales for only 4 hours/day, the cows weight was almost identical to those with 24 hour access but there was 37% less hay disappearance mostly due to less wastage. Buy another round bale feeder (according to Oklahoma State University cone type feeders are best) so all cows can eat at the same time and then fence cows out except for 4 hours/day. To entice cows away from hay, feed a small amount of grain away from the hay source. When I told my Dad about this he said, "Back in the early 70's when we had a drought I put the cows on stalks and gave them 2 hours access to the hay stacks and they did just fine and didn't waste a thing." I see now that the 'new' Purdue research was actually done locally 35 ago! (Note: Limiting Feed is not recommended for first calf heifers or thin, older cows.)



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7. Look at co-product feeds that are available, especially if you are fairly close to the plants. When close, wet gluten, wet distillers or wet brewer's grains could be the right price. Dry products from the above list can also be an excellent value.

8. A feeder wagon makes using wet by-product feeds much easier, but it is not an absolute. If you have a loader tractor you can feed the wet product into a bunk along with any mineral. The forage can be fed in round bale feeders where the cows only get 1 hour of access time per day. Purdue research shows cows will eat about 8lbs (3.63kg) of forage in one hour, which is plenty if you are also feeding a co-product feed. The key is that you have to have enough hay feeders so all cows can eat at the same time. This works quite easily as the forage supply is fenced off from the feed bunk. At 6 PM, the hot wire is opened and cows go eat the roughage. At 7 PM, the feed is placed in the bunk, the cows walk over to eat and the hot wire is reattached so the cows have no more access for the day.

9. Even if the dry co-product feeds are slightly higher in price compared to corn, they maybe a better value for feeding cows during the winter. The two advantages of corn gluten feed or even distillers dry grains is that they are high in protein and low in starch. The energy of



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these products is more 'rumen bug' friendly as they digest more like fibre and the bacteria and protozoa are more efficient in digesting it in a high fibre (hay or stalks) diet.

10. Discuss adding an ionophore with your vet (Rumensin, Bovatec, etc.) to feedlot rations. Research shows improved feed efficiency with the same gain.
11. Soybean stubble or straw can be baled and used for a roughage source. The nutrient value is quite low but it can be a roughage source if fed with a higher quality feed. The ideal use is to mix small amounts (3-6lbs (1.36kg – 2.72kg) of soybean stubble or straw) with a wet feed co-product or corn silage in a TMR (total mixed ration). Putting it in a round bale feeder as the sole source of nutrition **would not** be recommended.
12. Now is the time to plan for pasture renovation for next year. Frost seeding early next spring can pay big dividends.

Using hay feeders designed to limit hay waste

Oklahoma State recently studied the effects of hay feeder design on hay waste. Their research indicates that using a cone-style feeder or modified-cone feeder with a sheeted bottom should reduce hay waste to 5-6% of the original bale weight.

Two feeders with open bottoms and two feeders with sheeted bottoms were evaluated (Figure 1). The open bottom feeders wasted an average of 21% of the original bale weight. These two open bottom feeders are light weight, convenient to use and inexpensive. The sheeted (solid) bottom feeder reduced hay waste to 13%. However, a modified cone feeder with a sheeted bottom reduced hay waste to only 5%. The feeders with sheeted bottoms are both heavier and more expensive than the open bottom feeders. If hay is valued at \$220/tonne an open bottom feeder can cost up to \$46.20/tonne of hay fed to the cattle. A modified cone feeder, while still showing some loss, reduces this cost to \$11.00/tonne of hay fed. Even though the modified cone feeder is more expensive, for each tonne of hay used it can save you over \$35 in reduced hay loss. Few cow/calf operations will be able to absorb the cost of 21% hay waste on open bottom feeders when hay is extremely valuable. (Source: Oklahoma State University).

Figure 1. Round bale feeder types: (a) modified cone feeder with sheeted bottom; (b) conventional open bottom steel ring feeder (c) polyethylene pipe open bottom ring feeder (d) sheeted bottom steel ring feeder.





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