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Facing the Challenges of High Feed Costs

Noted Purdue University Agricultural Economist Chris Hurt recently remarked that “the cattle industry is in a period of adjustment to the new realities of higher feed prices, lingering drought, shortage of forages, and the biofuels era.”

High feed and other input prices naturally force cow-calf producers to look for ways to cut expenses in order to remain profitable. One alternative that some producers are considering is substituting byproduct feeds for commercial feeds.

Even though byproducts may be less expensive than commercial feeds, you need to be cautious and not switch without doing your homework, says Ted Perry, Purina Mills beef cattle nutritionist.

“The biggest issue we run into is that the byproducts need to be properly balanced for nutrient deficiencies,” says Perry. “We have supplements from Purina that are designed to be used specifically with the byproducts.”

Perry says that another challenge in using by-products is they need to be handled and utilized properly. “Our feeding structure, especially on the cow/calf side, is designed to use cubes or corn grain or something that’ll easily flow out of a bin and be augured.”

When you look at the least expensive byproducts, they usually are wet byproducts, Perry explains. They are usually shipped by the semi-truck load and they need to be utilized quickly to prevent spoilage, he says.

Byproducts not Workable for Everyone

Many cow-calf producers, especially those running fewer than 100 cows, may not be equipped to handle a semi load of wet byproduct and utilize it before it spoils, according to Perry.

“Once we’ve gone through the numbers with a lot of our producers, and you look at the costs of the byproducts versus the change in management they’re going to have to make to handle it, a lot of times it’s just not worth it. “The saving doesn’t justify the change in their total operation.”

“The byproducts tend to work better in large herds because they can be used up quick enough,” says Perry.

Perry recommends that you contact your Purina dealer to help you really look over your specific situation to see if feeding byproducts might fit economically in your total management program.

For cow-calf producers, a good strategy to help counter high feed costs is to explore ways to maximize the use of forage from your pastures, Perry explains.

Your Purina dealer can help you design a strategic supplementation program to put the exact amounts of protein and energy into your cows so they can better utilize the forages they consume. “What we have found is, if you supplement when you have grass, you can stretch your grass a lot further,” says Perry.

Purina has specific supplements formulated with IM Technology™ (Intake Modifying Technology) that causes cattle to consume multiple small snacks daily of the supplement. This optimizes the flow of nutrients to the digestive system, thereby increasing forage intake, overall utilization, and cattle performance. These IM Technology products include: Accuration/Cattle Limiter, Sup-R-Lix and Sup-R-Block.

Some cow-calf producers may also be looking at reducing or eliminating mineral supplementation as a strategy to help combat higher feedstuff costs. Perry says that even though the price of minerals has risen along with other feedstuffs, it might be more costly to reduce or eliminate them.

In fact, he suggests that rather than cut back on minerals to fight higher prices, it might behoove you to improve your mineral supplementation program.

“With the high feed prices, I would say that if you’re going to make any changes in a cow/calf operation, the best thing you can do is get a topnotch mineral program in those cows. That is going to maximize the efficiency of the forage that you can grow on your farm.”

Further, says Perry, “Minerals are the catalyst that drives the metabolic functions within the cow. “If we don’t feed minerals, the cows will live, but what we’ll see is calving rates going down.”

In addition, reproductive efficiency declines and calf weaning weights are reduced.

“Minerals will increase feed efficiency of the cow herd by about 10 percent,” says Perry.

“You might save money in the short term by cutting back on mineral supplementation, but you’ll be losing income in the long run,” concludes Perry.

Purina Products Help Calves Overcome Stress

Two popular Purina Mills’ calf starter lines that help weaned calves overcome the stresses of weaning, reduce sickness and put them on the road to quick weight gain of 40 to 80 pounds are Impact® Starter Complete and Preconditioning/Receiving Chow®.

Impact Starter Complete contains Purina’s patented intake modifiers (Intake Modifying Technology®) to help control feed consumption. This allows the formula to be energy dense to enhance calf performance and feed efficiency yet is safe enough to be fed free-choice.

Intake Modifying Technology impacts both the total amount consumed per day and how frequently the cattle come to the bunk. The net result is optimized nutrient intake throughout the day through multiple small snacks. IM Technology virtually eliminates the chance that cattle will over-consume the starter.

Among other things, Impact Starter provides an energy-dense formula with reduced roughage, the opportunity for enhanced average daily gain and improved feed efficiency through IM Technology. It is a coarse-textured ration that is more durable in handling and resistant to moisture than conventional pelleted rations.

Purina’s Preconditioning/Receiving Chow is a highly palatable, complete starting ration that gets cattle eating quickly and provides a smooth, consistent transition to growing or finishing rations. It is the “standard” by which all starters are measured. Released for marketing in 1968, it is still the number one weaning ration in the United States.

Contact your Purina dealer for more detailed information on these and other Purina beef cattle nutrition products.

Quick Tips—Weaning Management

A calf’s diet and surroundings change dramatically at weaning and if you don’t closely manage this lifestage, the value of your calves can be reduced. Calves can become sick and won’t grow as they should.

Here are four weaning management tips to ensure calves get a good, healthy start after they are weaned.

1. Reduce stress. Perform dehorning and castration before weaning. If the weather is still warm, have most of the moving and handling done by noon or early afternoon. Quickly and quietly separate calves from their dams. Ensure calves get started on water as soon as possible. When transporting calves, guard against severe fatigue.
2. Provide balanced and adequate nutrition. Wean calves before energy and protein levels of feed become inadequate. When forage is limited, early weaning can allow calves to maintain a high rate of growth and also prepare cows with improved body condition for winter. Because feed consumption is reduced in newly weaned calves, high quality feed should be provided. Also pay attention to micronutrients, such as copper and zinc. Deficiencies of these elements can lead to increased illness and a decline in growth performance.
3. Control and monitor for parasites. Internal and external parasites can impact performance and also compromise the calf’s immune system.
4. Vaccinate calves. Work with your veterinarian in developing and implementing specific calf vaccine protocols for your operation. As a minimum, you should vaccinate to protect calves against clostridial diseases and the common bovine respiratory disease viruses.