



Animal Nutrition *At Its Best*™

## FEEDING COWS AND CALVES DURING DROUGHT

Feeding and managing beef cow herds during a drought is a challenge to the manager. Costs increase and performance is below normal. Because cows are malnourished due to a lack of pasture, calf gains are depressed. Cows may not cycle, or even if they do, may fail to conceive. What can be done to alleviate the situation?

The first step may be early weaning of calves — as early as 60 to 90 days of age. This will reduce the energy drain on the cows and allow them to carry more condition into the fall. Early weaning will also reduce competition for forage, thus reducing overgrazing of the pasture or range.

Creep feeding is also a way to reduce reliance on limited quantities of standing forage, but creeping does not reduce the calf's nutrient demand on the cow. The suckling calf will continue to rely primarily on the cow's milk to meet appetite demands, so cow body condition may continue to suffer.

A third management option may be to cull the herd, keeping only healthy young to middle-aged productive cows. Cull late calvers regardless of age, because if forage is limited, they may breed back late, or not at all. If winter feed supplies are also in jeopardy, keep fewer replacements than usual.

### Feeding Cows

Cows will have a difficult time meeting energy needs during drought. Energy may be provided by either grain or high-quality roughage. Grain may often be the lowest cost alternative when it is used to supplement poor-quality roughage. The amount of grain to be fed will vary from about four pounds per head daily to as much as eight to ten

pounds per head daily. It is particularly important to supplement the cow's diet during the first 60 days after calving. Milk production and rebreeding will be improved when grain is fed in addition to roughage.

If cows do not receive adequate nutrition as a result of drought during the post-calving period, rebreeding may be delayed by as much as three months. If cows are not kept on schedule, the producer may experience several years of reduced production resulting from cows calving later in the season. Lack of adequate quantity and quality of drinking water during the drought can result in reduced milk production by the cow. This can lead to reduced calf gains. Make sure adequate water supplies are available.

After calves are weaned and cows are rebred, the maintenance requirements may be met by feeding six to eight pounds of grain and four to six pounds of low-quality roughage; e.g. wheat straw, grass hay, etc. This may be the least cost ration for the cow in the middle third of pregnancy. Additional protein from a vegetable oil meal may be necessary if the forage is low in protein — less than six to seven percent.

On the surface, it may appear that feeding grain will be very costly. This is usually not the case when the energy supplied by hay and grain are compared. One pound of grain will supply from 55% to 75% more energy than one pound of hay. When the cost to supply a given amount of energy from grain is compared to hay, grain will generally have the lowest cost.

If available forages are low in protein, supplementation with soybean meal or cottonseed meal will be required. The amount will vary from 0.5 to 2.0 pounds per head daily.

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**FC 32S** or **35S** or one of the product options should be offered either in the grain mix or free choice (check feeding directions). Phosphorus and the trace minerals in these products are required by rumen bacteria for optimum forage digestion and greater feed utilization and by the cows for maintenance of reproductive function.

### **Feeding Calves**

For information on producing balanced calf rations, reference the Product Knowledge Sheet for rations fortified with **VIGORTONE KALF-AYD** products. Oats are an excellent ingredient to include in a creep ration if they are priced about the same as other feed grains. They are not worth a premium.

Milo or barley may be substituted for corn. Use the lowest cost good quality grain.

As daily feed intake increases, it may be advisable to include chopped hay in the diet to avoid overconsumption of the grain.

### **Early Weaning**

It is much less costly to feed calves than it is to feed cows to produce milk. Calves are much more efficient in converting feed directly to meat than having the cow convert feed to milk that is then converted by the calf to meat.

Some producers have weaned calves as young as 60 days, but this requires more careful management than waiting until the calves are 90 days of age. Circumstances will dictate when calves should be weaned. Do not wait until cows are in poor body condition and milk production has ceased. Calves will lose weight if left with the cows too long and there is very little grazing.

A well-balanced creep ration including chopped or ground hay will be very satisfactory for early weaned calves. If a grain mix is fed with long-stemmed hay, the grain mix should be fed at the rate of one percent of body weight. This rate of feeding with good quality hay will be satisfactory to weights of 500 to 550 pounds.