

Managing Feed Costs This Fall

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The increased commodity prices we are currently experiencing have many cattle producers considering the costs associated with their feeding and management programs for weaning calves this fall. Here are a few tips that might aid cost conscientious producers.

Evaluate commodities on a cost per unit of energy or crude protein basis. These calculations should be done a dry matter basis, to facilitate an appropriate comparison between dry commodities such as corn, and wet commodities such as silage or wet distiller's grains. Additional cost such as freight, grain processing, and shrink may also be included.

Maximize use of commodities or ration ingredients produced on-farm. I am sure there are many different versions of the old saying "the best way to make a profit with land and livestock is to walk the crops off the farm". On-farm commodities, especially forages are usually more cost-effective than purchased commodities. Increasing the inclusion of on-farm produced commodities in the diet or even including a small amount of lower-cost ingredients like straw may reduce ration costs. However, the impacts of these changes must be weighed against cattle performance.

Reduce commodity shrink and feed waste. How much of the commodities you purchase are lost in storage and handling before they make it into the bunk? On most operations, these losses range from 2-10% depending on the commodity. Although these losses are minimal, they do add up (1% of a ton = 20 lbs; 1% of 20 tons = 400 lbs). The cost associated with minimal losses may add substantial cost to a commodity (400 lbs at \$250/ton = \$50 or \$2.50/ton). These losses often occur when commodities are handled or being loaded into feed mixers. The key to reducing commodity loss comes down to increased awareness.

Focus on efficiency. Feed to gain is always important, period. It is the benchmark by which feeding programs can most easily be evaluated on. Newly weaned calves are relatively efficient and can post feed conversions of 5:1 or less in confinement situations. Feeding technologies like ionophores or feeding management strategies such as limit-feeding should also be considered to further improve feed conversions.

Seek the counsel of a nutritionist or other professionals. Nutritionists, not only balance rations but also assist producers with evaluating commodities and estimating the effects of any ration changes on animal performance. Most K-State Research and Extension professionals can also assist producers with evaluating commodities or put them in contact with K-State Research and Extension Specialists with training in nutrition.

For more information, please contact the local K-State Research and Extension Office. K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.