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PROPER NUTRITION MAKES A HEIFER A MOMMA COW

by: Clifford Mitchell Reprinted from Cattle Today <http://www.cattletoday.com>

There are many different fancy names for how people eat today. South Beach diets or the former Atkins craze are designed for worshippers to follow a strict plan of attack when it comes to meal time. In elementary school all you heard was about the five food groups and how much of each should be consumed everyday. School lunch programs were designed to help growing bodies develop properly with the proper mix of nutrition that was put on the plate at noon.

In the beef business, cattlemen have to design a diet for growing animals that will help heifers grow into productive members of the cow herd. Much like the five food groups, a correct balance of protein and energy is needed to take these heifers from weaning to calving. One mistake could be very costly.

"Each operation needs to decide what the goal is. Some larger outfits are keeping more heifers feeding them to a lower target weight, incorporating a short breeding season and culling heifers that don't breed up. Most producers are feeding heifers to 65 percent of their mature weight by breeding time," says Dr. Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

"You have to develop heifers to an appropriate weight for breeding. For most, this is 65 to 70 percent of mature weight. Don't get these heifers too fat. Underfed heifers won't cycle," says Dr. Jason Banta, Texas A & M Extension, Overton, Texas.

There are many ways to get to the desired target weight. Programs must match available resources and design a feeding program that will be the most cost effective to reach the goal.

"Depending on resources, producers can reach the target weight with three different programs. A high rate of gain early then back off, low early and then push heifers into the breeding season or you can have heifers maintain a constant rate of gain throughout the growing process," Banta says. "There is no right or wrong way to reach the target weight as long as all the heifers meet the goal before breeding season. Limit the amount of grain you put into these heifers."

"For most, heifers will need to gain about one and a half pounds per day to reach the target weight," Selk says. "The goal should be to have 90 percent of these heifers reach target weight before the breeding season. If producers don't have the proper nutrition, they could be looking at a large percentage of open heifers."

Just like designing a diet to meet desired nutritional requirements for humans, the basics must be covered before any supplementation begins. Testing feed resources will help create a feeding program that will meet desired goals, but not empty the bank account.

"From a dollars and cents standpoint it is really important to balance your ration. Developing heifers need a diet that is 12 percent crude protein," Selk says. "Test your hay so you know what the quality is. The grain portion of the diet depends on the quality of the forage. Protein is still the most expensive part of the ration."

"Analyze your hay so you know what to supplement. You could have really good hay and need very little supplement or you could find out the hay is extremely poor quality. I recommend people test each cutting of hay to match supplementation," Banta says. "Not knowing what you have costs money. It doesn't take long to get back what it costs to analyze the hay with correct supplementation."

High feed costs have producers scratching their heads looking for alternatives to supplement the cow herd. The early stage of the ethanol era has definitely created more questions for producers than answers. Expensive corn has made commodity or byproduct feeds more popular in livestock country. This form of supplementation comes with its own set of rules.

"If you are going to feed commodity or byproduct feeds, consult your extension specialist or a nutritionist. Many of these feeds are high in phosphorous and sulphur, which can become toxic at certain levels," Banta says. "Producers need to look for the "best" cost ration or feed source. Some of the commodity feeds have handling and storage issues. Sit down and figure out a price per nutrient to figure out the most economical solution. Breaking it down to price per unit TDN or price per unit of protein will give you accurate costs. The "best" cost ration may not be the cheapest per ton."

"In a fall calving program it is pretty easy to get those heifers to grow if we have any rain at all. They may need a little extra protein in the late summer when forage quality declines. Spring calving heifers take quite a bit of supplementation to get them to reach the target weight," Selk says. "With the influx of ethanol byproducts, producers using them for the first time need to consult their extension agent or a nutritionist to make sure they are getting a balanced ration."

Minerals play a role in the developing heifers. Depending on feed resources there could be a fine line for producers when it comes to deficiencies or toxicities. Some additives could also be helpful in the ration during the growth cycle.

"The mineral thing is really one of the most difficult parts of cattle nutrition to understand. In some instances, we can do as much damage with excess as we can deficiencies. Proper mineral intake will depend on feed resources, because the ethanol feeds are high in sulphur," Selk says. "There are several good reasons to include ionophores in the ration. Research shows heifers getting an ionophore reach puberty two weeks before the ones that don't. It also protects heifers from coccidiosis and helps a little with feed efficiency. It is worth the extra cost to include this in the diet."

Small grain pastures are very common to this region. Most depend on these forages to grow cattle and keep down the cost of gain. Many cattlemen have tried to take advantage of this resource to develop heifers, but come away sometimes with an empty feeling because heifers did not breed as well as planned. Like most things in the beef business the same recipe does not work for all ranchers.

"We have very little research to support theories on small grain pastures. If you're trying to breed cattle for a fall program and they're on really lush winter pastures you might have some conception problems," Banta says. "For a true spring calving season, forage quality won't be quite as high and heifers tend to breed better."

"Some cattlemen have chosen to no longer use wheat pasture to develop heifers because of declined conception rates. Wheat gets them big enough, but cattle don't breed as well for some reason," Selk says. "I think with what I have seen, through our research, if we can get cattle off wheat and put them on a diet where they're gaining at the same rate as they were on wheat it will work. Cattle in graze-out or if you take them off wheat then reduce the amount of energy they are getting drastically, you're asking for a wreck on breed-up." (over)

Monitoring heifers through the growing process will help producers make sure they are on target at breeding time. The future depends, like always, on how many and how quickly can a producer get them bred. Adjusting the ration at certain times in the development phase will help producers get it right.

“The key is to have your heifers cycling at the start of breeding season. Two months prior to breeding, cattlemen should weigh and evaluate heifers to make sure they’re on track,” Selk says. “Adjust the ration, if needed, to get them ready for breeding. If you plan to AI, you might want to push heifers a little harder to get them cycling earlier.”

“The earlier the heifers hit the target weight, the earlier they will start cycling. Try to have heifers at target weight 30 to 45, maybe even 60 days before breeding season. Producers have to look at what it costs to get them there that fast,” Banta says. “The biggest criteria, for replacement heifers, are to reach the target weight and have cattle gaining at an appropriate rate for breeding.”

After breeding season and preg check, cattlemen are dealing with a different animal. Most treat these bred heifers just like the dry cows, feeling they have done their job we’ll put them up for the winter and break them out next spring at calving season. Most change the evaluation process once the heifers are bred. Heifers are evaluated based on a condition score, not a specific target weight.

“Once heifers are bred, change from target weight to Body Condition Score (BCS). I want heifers at a minimum BCS of 6 when they calve,” Selk says. “Typically, heifers will need to gain between three quarters and one pound per day from breeding to calving.”

“Get that weight on the heifers before they calve when their nutritional requirements aren’t as high,” Banta says. “These heifers have to have a BCS of 6 before calving. BCS has the biggest impact on rebreeding. You really want to make cattle are in good condition before calving on first and second calf heifers.”

Non-lactating, bred females maintain their own nutritional requirements. Most producers are paying more attention to these females before calving season to make the tough times easier.

“A common misconception is, if we don’t feed heifers as much, we’ll have less calving problems,” Banta says. “Under developed heifers actually increase calving problems because they aren’t in good enough condition to do their job.”

“If heifers are too thin, you’ll have more health problems in the calf crop and lower breed back,” Selk says. “You have to make sure the nutrition is there so they calve easy and have good colostrum to pass on to the new born.”

There are many ways to get the desired results. School lunch programs or diets change to get to an endpoint. If a balanced meal is not eaten with appropriate levels of the five food groups, or the diet is cheated on, the only one that suffers is the one that did not follow the rules.

Poorly developed heifers make for a bad deal all the way around. Many problems can occur and most of them come with a pretty steep price tag to fix. Maintaining BCS throughout the pregnancy could help avoid pitfalls and producers could be fighting a losing battle if they try to play catch up.

“Heifers have to be in good enough shape to allow them to continue you to grow, milk and recycle. We ask an awful lot of that two-year-old for 85 days,” Selk says. “You can cheat a bunch of heifers through the winter, then put a slew of expensive feed into them and never catch up. Cattle that are in good condition when they calve, will work a lot better.”

“It is basically impossible to play catch up. Number one because she has normal maintenance requirements, number two she’s still growing and three she’s lactating,” Banta says. “You can’t look at these heifers 30 days prior to breeding or calving and then make up for your mistakes. Give yourself plenty of time, 60 to 90 days, small adjustments to the ration or feeding rate can cure a lot of problems, if there is time to do it.”

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