



Feeding Strategies During Dry Conditions

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Cattle and sheep producers in most parts of Manitoba are already experiencing feed shortages due to dry conditions. Dry conditions shorten the available grazing and increase the time for supplemental feeding of beef cattle of all classes.

Cows with calves have higher requirements for nutrition to support milk production than do females that have been dried off. They also have a bigger appetite. Cattle require a daily minimum of 1/2 % of their body weight in the form of effective fiber or long forage. So, high level of nutrition and supplementation should be continued through the end of the breeding season.

When the cows have had enough opportunity to get bred and you pull the bulls, the level of feeding can go down.

The best thing to do to help the feed situation is to wean the calves. Calves that are 3-4 months old and weigh 300 pounds or more are able to make their living on their own. For the cow, once she is dry her appetite and nutrient requirements are less and it will be easier for the cow to hold her condition and not milk down to a very thin status. Limited forage plus grain can be used to maintain the cow fairly economically.

Early weaning of calves requires that a high quality grain-based diet be fed to the calves. Palatable grain mixes of 14-16% protein, plus good quality mixed pasture or mixed hay should be offered. Little calves will not need a lot of pasture if they are fed grain in addition. Feed efficiency of light calves on grain diets is very good. Their young digestive system can't hold a lot of feed, and they are at an efficient stage of growth. Rate of gain is good on a fairly low level of feed intake.

Make certain you are feeding cows that are worth keeping. Carefully evaluate cows for soundness, freedom from disease conditions, reproductive performance, and other important criteria. Cull those that don't measure up.

With hay supplies limited in most area, differing options for wintering the cow herd have to be considered. [Straw](#) can be used extensively as winter feed if energy, protein, mineral and vitamin requirements are met. Straw does not contain sufficient levels of these nutrients and the use of grain, protein supplements and mineral/vitamin premixes is needed make straw-based wintering diets work well. Rations with a high level of straw in combination with grass/legume hay or grain can meet your beef cow's requirements

but all rations must be balanced for protein, energy, vitamins and minerals. [Corn stover](#) refers to the corn plant after the grain is removed and includes leaves, cobs and stalks. Nutrient levels in this can be extremely variable but it can be grazed or baled to provide an excellent feed source, again ration balancing is important. Grain corn can also be taken as silage, although not for everyone because of the storage and handling aspect, it does have the potential to provide a lot of feed from a few acres.

Grain is a cost-effective source of nutrition. [Corn](#), [barley](#), or [oats](#) can be used interchangeably. In addition, [canola meal](#), [grain screenings](#), and [distillers' grains](#) have energy content similar to corn. (Note: more information on these and other sources can be found in the links). [Brewers' grains](#) are somewhat lower in energy, but may be useful if it can be purchased at a fairly low cost. Some by-product feeds are available in high moisture form, a feed with 25% dry matter that costs \$35 per ton is actually \$140 per ton of dry matter. Compare price on an equal moisture basis. Your local Livestock Specialist can provide assistance.

High grain with limited roughage will likely be the lowest cost feeding program for cows. When feeding this type of diet, though, the mineral program must be changed. Because of the high grain level, a mineral that has a lower Phosphorous and higher Calcium level needs to be used, similar to what would be fed to a steer in a feedlot.

Finally, some thoughts on forage management.

- Don't graze too long on short grass - it will take even longer to recover.
- Better to concentrate the cattle in a smaller area and bring feed to them. Allow the balance of the property to grow grass that can be grazed later once there is enough of it.
- Let the grass grow back before grazing. Grazing short grass just means you will have short grass for an even longer time.

Lack of rain and hungry cattle are a bad combination. Many cattlemen have found the nutritional solution to this problem with grain feeding and limited hay. Early weaning of the calves further eases the feed shortage and enables calves to continue to grow.

For more information on feeding strategies go to <http://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/livestock/production/beef/>

<http://www.beefresearch.ca/blog/drought-management-strategies-3/>