

Planning Livestock and Feed Resources During Drought

When faced with drought conditions across the region and many western provinces, options to keep in mind when planning winter feeding include: buying feed, alternative feeds, testing, selling livestock, and weaning early.

Purchasing Feed

Sometimes the price of hay per ton goes down late in the year if there are excess hay stocks, but in a drought year do not wait to buy feed.

Don't limit your purchases to grass or grass-legume mixtures, consider using alfalfa hay as an option. Usually higher in protein & energy than grass hay or grain hay, it is sometimes available at a lower cost.

Fair quality alfalfa (less protein than premium & good quality alfalfa) or even rained-on alfalfa hay might meet the nutrient requirements of your livestock, just make sure it is not moldy. Oat hay can usually be found on the market & is a viable alternative if used in a balanced ration meeting animal nutrient requirements.

Alternative Feeds

Grass Seed By-products

Another option in times of forage shortages is to feed grass straw or grass seed screening pellets. If you choose to buy fescue or ryegrass straw or seed screenings, make sure they are not from harmful, high endophyte varieties.

Choose this byproduct from a non-endophyte, a low-endophyte, or a "Friendly" endophyte variety of the grasses. There are novel or friendly endophyte forage varieties that are not harmful to livestock, but these are special cultivars. You should confirm or test products for endotoxins and blend them with other feeds for a total diet with a tolerable concentration

Residual Forage

Although the nutritive value of mature forage that is standing in the field can be very low, cows, sheep and other ruminants can use this if they're also fed a small amount of supplemental protein.

Consider renting mature pasture and supplementing it with alfalfa hay or another protein source (ex: soybean meal). **You don't have to feed the protein supplement every day.** Protein supplements are actually used more efficiently if you feed a double dose every other day, or three times the daily amount every three days.

Grain

Feeding some grain is a way to decrease the amount of forage needed to winter livestock. Depending on the cost of grain and hay, it may or may not be more expensive. Feed grains in long feed troughs with ample room for all animals to eat at the same time & to avoid bossy cows or ewes from eating more than their share.

Slowly adapt animals to grain diets by substituting a few pounds of grain for a few pounds of hay. Every few days, increase the amount of grain in the diet until you reach the desired grain level. This could be done over a period of 2 to 3 weeks.

Generally, your goal for a full sized cow should be to substitute 10 lbs of grain for 15 to 20 lbs of forage.

In finishing rations, ruminants can be fed more grain than this but still require a diet that is at least 10% forage (pasture or hay) for a functional digestive system. Remember though, the current strategy is for saving on hay, not fattening animals.

An example ration is for a 1200lb cow that usually eats about 30 lbs of hay (2.5% of her BW) each day. She could be transitioned from an all-forage diet to a diet of 15 lbs of forage & 10 lbs. of grain.

A high-grain diet contains more energy than mature cows need. Although the cow's need for feed will be satisfied, she will probably gain weight on this diet. The animals will probably vocalize because they feel hungry due to lack of fill, but they should get used to the amount of feed in 2-3 weeks.

* **Make any diet changes slowly** so as not to upset the animal's digestive system (especially if adding grain).

* **Major changes** should be done gradually over a **2 week period.**

Testing Feeds and Balancing Rations

You should test your hay and by-products feed for nutritive value. New feeds or feed combinations will require new knowledge on how to balance the diets for the animals you are feeding. For detailed info checkout the OSU Beef Cattle Nutrition Workbook.

<https://cataog.extension.oregonstate.edu/em8883>

Consider costs

If you are feeding animals with low nutrient requirements (dry cows, maintaining bulls, over-wintering calves), good quality hay alone will probably be the least expensive ration. But, if you are feeding animals with higher requirements (lactating cows, replacement heifers) or using low-quality forage (poor quality hay or grass-straw/screening pellets), you will need to add protein and energy.

Reduce Animal Numbers

Consider culling undesirable animals. Have your Vet pregnancy check your cows and get rid of opens when market conditions are favorable compared to feed costs.

Early Weaning

If forage is in short supply or cow body condition is low, calves can be weaned early (before 7-9mth). This preserves cow energy reserves to allow for development of the new calf inside her and keep her in good shape for timely re-breeding after that calf is born.

Studies have shown, that in times of forage shortages, the cost of feeding early-weaned calves was more then offset with improved reproductive performance of cows that were kept in a body condition that favored efficient reproductive performance.

Whether you find enough hay or not, we hope you can use the tips in this article for using feeds wisely

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Original article can be found at <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/animals-livestock/beef/livestock-feed-resources-planning-during-drought>

Please refer to the BCRC Drought Related Resources Insert for further information.