

IMPACT



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Supplement Helps Ranchers Drastically Reduce Winter Feeding Costs

The Situation

Winter-feeding of cows represents the highest single annual cost to ranchers across the United States, and more specifically in South Central Idaho. Ranchers who identify and implement less expensive alternatives to feeding hay in the winter improve their chances for profitability in an increasingly unstable business environment.

Our Response

Bob Bronson, a Cassia County rancher, sought the assistance of University of Idaho Extension Educators in developing a winter nutrition program for his 170 cow herd. Bronson's objectives were to develop a nutrition (supplement) program that was more economical than feeding hay and would enable him to better utilize his crested wheat grass pastures in the high desert country of southern Cassia County.

University of Idaho Extension faculty members assisted Bronson in determining the nutritional requirements of the cows, the nutrients available in the standing forage (crested wheat grass), and the costs of available feedstuffs. Each of these factors were used to develop a winter supplement mix that consisted of a protein source feed (cottonseed meal, soybean meal or canola meal), ground corn, and salt. Salt was included in the mix as a means of limiting consumption.

During the winter feeding period (December to mid April), cows ranged on crested wheat grass pastures,

and were supplemented with 2 to 4 pounds of the winter supplement. The cows were fed no hay, unless warranted by extreme winter weather conditions. Throughout the period, University of Idaho faculty members, along with Bronson, monitored the cows to ensure they maintained body condition, remained healthy, and remained reproductively sound. This regular observation of the herd also allowed supplement consumption to be monitored and regulated when necessary.

Program Outcomes

Bronson has followed the winter supplement protocol for the past four years (1999-2003). The average cost of this winter-feeding program is about \$35.00 per cow per year. Bronson estimates the supplement program has saved him approximately \$145.00 per cow per year. These savings give Bronson an advantage over many western ranchers, who usually feed about 1½ tons of hay per cow per year. Actual results are shown below.

Cows on crested wheat grass and the supplement

Description Supplement	Total lbs.	Total cost Supplement	# Cows on feed	\$ per head
*Soybean/salt/ground corn	65,860	\$5,562.35	168	\$32.92

*Based on a 4 year average.

The average cost IF hay would have been fed

Description of feed	Total lbs. fed	Total cost of Hay *	Cows on feed	\$ per head
Alfalfa Hay	546,000	\$30,030.00	168	\$178.75

*The average (4 year) alfalfa hay price was \$110 per ton.

Reproductive soundness has been maintained in the Bronson cow herd. Ninety-five percent of the cows regularly calve within a 90-day period. Bronson expects a 95% calf crop weaned. Weaning weights average around 520 pounds in a period of about 240 days from the beginning of calving season.

Following the success of the winter feeding program at Bob Bronson's ranch, University of Idaho faculty members organized a field day. The field day afforded area ranchers a chance to visit Bronson's ranch and witness the successes of the winter feeding program he had implemented.

One rancher in attendance at the field day was Mike Kossler, the 6-S Ranch manager. After witnessing how economically Bronson was able to maintain his cows, Kossler decided to implement the winter feeding program into his own beef cattle operation. The following data from the 6-S Ranch, substantiates the value and feasibility of wintering cattle without feeding hay. The winter feeding period at the 6-S Ranch ran from early December through the middle of April.

Cows on crested wheat grass and the supplement

Description Supplement	Total lbs.	Total cost Supplement	# Cows on feed	\$ per head
Soybean/salt/ground corn	49,280	\$4,839.96	196	\$24.69

Cost IF hay had been fed

Description of feed	Total lbs. fed	Total cost of Hay *	Cows on feed	\$ per head
Hay	637,000	\$39,812.50	196	\$203.13

*All the hay was dairy quality and was sold for \$125 per ton.

As was the case in Bob Bronson's operation, reproductive soundness was maintained at the 6-S Ranch while using the winter feeding program. All of the 196 bred cows calved within a 48-day period, with a 98% calf crop. Calf weaning weights averaged 551 pounds for the steers and 514 pounds for the heifers.

The Future

Perhaps the most noteworthy result of this project is that other area ranchers are taking notice of the aforementioned success stories and are seeking winter feeding alternatives for their cow herds. Cutting winter feed costs can help ensure a beef producer's economic viability. The winter feeding

(supplement) protocol described here has been shown to reduce winter feed costs. In addition to the ranchers mentioned previously, the Point Springs Grazing Association has adopted this winter feeding program.

For More Information

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