Supplementing the Cow Herd During the Summer

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Bahiagrass pasture has excellent quality in the spring, but its quality progressively decreases as bahiagrass grows and matures throughout the summer. With many cattle producers weaning and selling calves in late summer it is possible that supplementation of cows herds grazing bahiagrass pasture during the summer will have a positive effect on both cow and calf performance.

In the early 1990's we conducted a series of four trials in which cow/calf pairs grazing bahiagrass pasture were fed a molasses-urea supplement for an average of 75 days prior to weaning. The supplement contained 30% crude protein (9% urea). This level of urea helped control supplement intake and provide crude protein. Molasses-urea supplement was fed free-choice in lick-wheel feeders. Cow herds were fed a loose mineral supplement free-choice.

Cow/calf pairs fed molasses-urea consumed an average of 4.0 pounds of supplement per pair per day. It is assumed that cows consumed most of the supplement, but calves were frequently seen eating molasses-urea from the lick-wheel feeder.

In comparison to cows not supplemented, cows fed molasses-urea gained 21 more pounds during the 75-day supplementation period before weaning. Likewise, calves nursing cows in herds fed molasses-urea supplement were 26 pounds heavier at weaning than calves nursing cows in herds not supplemented.

Over the four trials cow/calf pairs averaged consuming 300 pounds of molasses-urea supplement each. With the current price of feeder calves exceeding $1.00 per pound ($100/cwt), summer supplementation with molasses-urea appears to be a profitable management practice. Assuming a similar response in calf weaning weight a producer could afford to pay up to $173 per ton for molasses-urea supplement placed in the feeder and recover feed costs.

In addition to the increased value of calves, the 21 additional pounds gained by cows fed molasses-urea during the summer have economic benefits. The added weight on cull cows would be rewarded with extra income when they are sold. If cows are retained in the herd, the added weight and associated improved body condition of brood cows will have a positive impact on cow performance in the next production cycle.

Good feeder calf prices allow cattlemen to introduce practices that may not normally be profitable. Summer supplementation is a practice that currently falls into that category. Other supplements fed during the summer would likely produce similar benefits in animal performance to that found with molasses-urea liquid feed. I feel the economic success of summer supplementation is controlling supplement intake, and the best efficiency is obtained when supplement intake is maintained at 3 to 4 pounds per cow/calf pair per day.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact  Findlay Pate