Feeding Molasses as a Winter Supplement

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By Findlay Pate
UF/IFAS, Range Cattle REC

Although South Florida winters are mild, grass growth is diminished from October through April or May, and the availability and quality of forage is very low from December through March. To winter the brood cow herd, Florida ranchers try to go into the winter with stockpiled grass from the lush summer growth. But, stockpiled grass is lower in quality than summer grass because it has matured and weathered by the cool temperatures and occasional frost. For example, the digestibility of bahiagrass is 50 to 55% in the summer and drops to 40 to 45% in December.

The brood cow has her greatest demand for energy during the winter. Most South Florida producers calve their cows during October through January and breed their cows from January through April. When bred, cows are in peak milk production with a nursing calf. Thus, they must not only consume energy for milk production, but energy to recover from calving and begin cycling for rebreeding.

The low energy supply and high energy demand by the brood cow is the reason energy supplementation is so important during the winter, and why cattle will respond to an energy supplement. The challenge is to supply this energy at a cost that will be profitable. The supplement best suited for Florida is molasses, it is a by-product of the Florida sugar and citrus industries and available at affordable prices.

Two four-year studies were conducted at the Everglades Research Center which evaluated molasses strictly as an energy supplement since grass grown on the muck soils around Lake Okeechobee contains adequate protein. Brood cows were fed five pounds of molasses per head daily during the winter (about 135 days). Cows fed molasses produced 50 lbs more calf for each brood cow exposed to a bull than cows not fed molasses. The benefit was from 5 more calves per 100 cows exposed to bulls and a 27 lbs heavier calf at weaning.

The response to molasses feeding by brood cows grazing sandland bahiagrass pasture should be even better than that observed for cows in the above studies. Winter has a more severe effect on sandland bahiagrass pastures than on muck soil St. Augustine grass pastures. Molasses can also act as a carrier for supplemental protein needed by cows grazing sandland pastures.
It is recommended that molasses feeding to brood cows be started at the beginning of the calving season and continued through much of the breeding season. Do not wait until pastures are overgrazed before feeding molasses because forage is needed for the efficient utilization of molasses. Feed cows 3 to 5 lbs of molasses-based feed per head daily during the winter, adjusting the amount fed as indicated by the condition of the cow herd. Discontinue feeding molasses in the spring as the condition of the cow herd and pastures dictate. Molasses with 15 to 20 % crude protein can be fed in a lick tank or twice weekly in an open trough with good results.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate