There are three important factors to consider when selecting a winter supplement for beef cattle. These include meeting the nutrient needs of the animal, convenience of feeding, and cost.

Nutrient needs are related to the condition and age of the animal and the availability and quality of the forage. In cases where cattle may be in good condition going into the winter or a relatively good supply of forage like Hemarthria is available, a small amount (1 to 2 pound) of a 30 to 40% protein supplement would be adequate. In cases where cattle may be in moderate to poor condition or the winter pasture is bahiagrass, a moderate amount (4 to 6 pounds) of a 15 to 20% protein supplement may be needed. For old cattle, urea is a suitable source of crude protein, whereas, for young growing cattle, first calf heifers, or even young cows being rebred for the second time, natural protein is recommended.

Convenience of feeding is a very important factor for cattlemen with a small herd size. A dry, bagged feed in the form of a meal, pellet, or cube may be the supplement of choice. These cattlemen may have the time to feed cattle daily. However, research has shown that cattle can be fed dry protein or energy supplements twice weekly with results equal to daily feeding.

One of the more convenient supplement types are protein or energy blocks. A similar supplement is molasses tubs. These supplements are formulated such that they can be placed with cattle over long intervals (several weeks), and daily intake will be fairly consistent. An advantage of blocks and molasses tubs is that they can be transported in almost any kind of vehicle and stored anywhere.
Molasses-based liquid supplements can be formulated such that a single feeding will be eaten over an extended period using lick-wheel feeders. Liquid supplements can be very convenient for supplementing small herds since feed dealers will deliver these products into a lick-wheel feeder. Monitor liquid supplement intake from lick-wheel feeders very carefully. At times cattle may over or under consume the amount of supplement intended.

It may be that several types of supplement will fit ones need. In these cases a cost comparison should be made. This is best done by comparing the quantities of major nutrients provided daily by the supplements in question. These nutrients are energy and crude protein. Crude protein is listed on the feed tag, and energy, as TDN, should be provided by your feed store manager. In cases where natural protein is needed for young cattle, its content is calculated from the feed tag as total % crude protein, less % crude protein equivalent provided from non-protein nitrogen (usually urea).

With the excellent feeder calf market at the present, dollars spent on supplement for the cow herd will be very cost effective. Winter supplementation will result in a higher conception rate for the cow herd and a heavier weaning weight for marketed calves.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate