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Selecting a Winter Feeding Site

Winter feeding of cattle is a necessary part of nearly all cow-calf operations. The feeding site is the area that a producer will feed the cattle regularly, providing hay and sometimes grain or other supplements to provide the nutrients cattle need.

When cattle are closely confined, especially in the winter, manure and wasted hay can accumulate. The manure contains bacteria, viruses, and protozoa that increase susceptibility to calf scours and other diseases such as navel ill and coccidiosis. When cattle are fed hay, unrolled or in a ring feeder, the hay can become trampled and wet, until it is eventually rotten and unusable as feed.

Animal energy requirements are increased with muddy conditions, whether they are created in feeding areas, or just in wet pasture conditions. Performance can be reduced when cattle have to walk through mud, or maintain body temperature when their legs and belly are covered in mud. That extra energy requires more feed. Lots of effort is required on the part of the producer also, in time and fuel to haul feed.

Tractors and other equipment create ruts, which encourages standing water or mud. Combined with the cattle foot traffic around the feeder, heavy equipment creates even more mud, destroys vegetation, and can increase erosion. All of these factors degrade pasture quality and increases the chance of polluting surface water runoff.

As hay breaks down, nutrients, like nitrogen and phosphorus are created. When water and sludge drains, these excess nutrients are added to the runoff. Neither of these nutrients are positive if introduced to local waterways. Feeding densely stocked cattle concentrates all these pollutants.

It is common to see a “sacrifice” pasture, where producers will confine animals to a smaller area to reduce the land damaged from winter feeding. A poorly chosen site for winter feeding can have significant negative impacts on soil and water quality. A well-chosen site will be on a summit, well drained and easily accessible during all winter weather conditions.

Providing a space of land between the feeding sites and water bodies will decrease the risk of water pollution. These riparian areas give nutrients a place to go rather than into the water system. Designated riparian areas are fenced so animals do not graze those areas and add their own personal little piles of nutrients.

Concrete or gravel pads under hay feeders or feed bunks can greatly decrease the creation of mud. Situating feed bunks and hay rings across the pasture from the water source or mineral will encourage animals to utilize the entire pasture rather than hanging out in small areas creating more mud.

I always encourage producers to forage test their hay. This is the most economical practice to save quite a bit of money on supplement feed. Keep in mind the animals nutrient requirement, it changes based on stage of gestation and with temperature. Knowing what nutrients your hay provides could save on the amount of feed that needs to be put out.

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