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“Beef Production Strategies” article

Frequently Asked Beef Cattle Feed Questions

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How much mineral supplement should a cow eat in a day?

This depends upon the specific supplement fed. Various ingredients in the supplement can improve or decrease palatability. For example, magnesium may reduce palatability. The physical form of the product can also affect consumption rates; fresh loose mineral mix may be consumed faster than a similar mix that has become hardened together from weather exposure. The product label should note the expected intake rate, which is often 4 ounces (1/4 pound) per day. Other products may have expected intake rates of 2 or 6 ounces per head per day. This is an average consumption rate over time, and it can vary with environmental conditions such as weather and forage conditions. As with other nutrients, calves will likely consume lesser quantities than mature cattle. A good idea of average daily mineral supplement intake can be determined by monitoring how much supplement is offered to a given number of cattle over a certain time period. Waste from wind, spillage, or precipitation will contribute to mineral supplement disappearance but should not be counted towards intake. If the mineral disappearance seems excessive over time, then take steps to reduce consumption such as switching products, adding more salt to the mineral mix, not allowing mineral feeders to become empty before refilling them, moving the supplement further from cattle loafing areas, and ensuring adequate feeder space to reduce feeding competition. If mineral supplement intake needs to be increased, then work to improve the palatability of the supplement and move it closer to cattle loafing areas.

If I close the weirs on a self-feeder down to the smallest setting, will that be enough to limit feed intake on a feed that does not contain an intake limiter?

No. By definition a self-feeder is exactly that – a self-feeder. As long as cattle can access feed, they have the opportunity to consume it. If a feed does not contain adequate quantities of an intake limiter such as salt, then cattle may overconsume that feed if accessible. Narrowing the gap through which feed flows out of a self-feeder will not stop the flow of feed out of the feeder. Cattle will use their tongues to continue to remove feed from the feeder, and gravity will continue the feed flow unless caking occurs to the extent that caked feed cannot be removed by the cattle. Using a self-feeder is only appropriate if cattle are adapted to full feed and a full feed offering is desired by the cattle manager or if the feed in the self-feeder contains an appropriate intake limiter. Overeating or abrupt diet changes resulting from improper self-feeder use can result in severe and even dangerous digestive problems such as acidosis.

How can I reduce my feed bill without sacrificing cattle performance?

Start with a good forage management program. Strive to produce high-quality forage with good yields that meet grazing demands as much as possible. Test forage for quality to best match the nutritive value of the forage to cattle nutrient needs. Supplemental feed is often the most expensive part of a cattle nutrition program but is only needed if forage

supplies do not provide adequate quantities of nutrients that cattle need. Divide the herd into feeding groups based on nutrient needs to reduce the chance of over- or under-feeding cattle. Provide enough feeder space to reduce feeding competition and possible overeating by aggressive cattle and also to allow more timid cattle a chance to eat supplement that is offered. Purchase feed in bulk to capture price per unit discounts and during times of the year when prices are relatively low. Select feeds based on nutrient composition in addition to price. Consider using technologies such as ionophores, implants, and improved cattle genetics that will help achieve nutritional program goals in a more cost-effective manner.

Can I feed candy to cattle?

Candies used for cattle feed are ones that for whatever reason did not make the grade for human consumption. They may vary from hard candies to chocolates to gums and may include packaging materials such as aluminum foil, paper, or, plastic wraps. Although they provide an excellent energy source (sugar), they are not typically adequate in protein content to meet cattle needs alone. Feed quality may vary considerably depending on the candy used. Large quantities of chocolate are not recommended for feeding to cattle due to the theophylline and theobromine content. In addition, milk chocolate may contain up to 28% fat, which limits the amount of it that should be fed. Oftentimes, these are “special” deals that occur infrequently. Therefore, it is not recommended that a feeding program be based upon candy availability. As with all other waste feed, use a conservative approach to incorporate candy into no more than 10% of the total cattle diet.

I want to measure out feed using buckets. Will a 5-gallon bucket hold about 25 pounds of feed when it is filled to the top?

It is very important to feed based on weight and not volume to accurately meet cattle nutrient requirements. There is wide variation in the bulk density of feedstuffs. Twenty-five pounds of whole cottonseed takes up noticeably more space than 25 pounds of ground corn, and a bucket full of whole cottonseed is noticeably lighter than the same bucket full of corn. If buckets will be used for measuring out feed, then be sure to weigh buckets of each feed to determine their weight. Then mark buckets with fill lines that equate to a given weight for that volume of specific feedstuffs. These fill lines will differ from one feed to the next, so make sure that the volume and weight equivalents are determined and labeled for individual feedstuffs. Do not rely on memory to keep track of fill lines on buckets for individual feeds; make sure they are clearly marked on the buckets. Also mark each bucket after weighing feed in that specific bucket in case there is any variation in the dimensions of one bucket to the next.

Where can I find out more information about related questions not listed here?

In Mississippi, county Extension offices are located in all 82 counties of the state. These local offices are great resources for finding the answers to cattle-related questions and much, much more. For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service or visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.