One of the biggest factors that drives up annual cow cost is the winter feed cost per cow. This week we will look at this costly practice, and learn how it greatly impacts annual cost. We will also provide tips and other advice that may help you decrease the winter feeding cost, which will help improve the profitability of your operation.

In order to appropriately budget for winter feed costs, a brief evaluation should be done to cover various areas of your operation. These areas include body condition score (BCS) of the cattle, forage availability, and quality and quantity of hay bales that are currently on hand. A BCS assessment of the cattle should be done to help give you a general idea of where the cattle will be when winter comes based on their current conditions. Performing a BCS evaluation **now** allows ample time to get cows in proper condition before winter comes. If cows are not in adequate BCS going into winter, they will likely not make it through winter as a productive cow. For more information on BCS, refer to our July 24, 2012 article "Body Condition Score" and February 22, 2013 article "BCS- Reproductive Impact". Links to both of these articles may be found at the end of this article. You should also look at your pastures and determine the quality and quantity of the forages available. An accurate assessment of quantity and quality of hay available is also greatly beneficial. Using this information combined with projected winter forage/pasture availability, you can calculate whether or not your cows will be receiving sufficient amount of nutrients this winter, or if they will need to be supplemented further, which increases winter feed cost. Current BCS, forage availability, and hay quantity/quality combined aid in creating a game plan for how cows should be managed this winter. Developing a plan ahead of time is not only wise, it has the potential to save large quantities of money.

To help reduce winter feed cost, use the "knowns" to calculate an estimated winter feeding start and end date, including *what* will be fed. Based on the conditions that are custom to your operation only, make a forecast of when hay and winter supplementation should be fed. These operation specific conditions include amount of rain received, amount and quality of forage, and BCS of your herd. When assessing hay quantity, it is important to have the hay tested so that you can be sure what percent protein it is. Based on quality of bales and requirements of cows, you may predict when you should expect to start feeding the hay, and how many bales will need to be fed throughout winter. If it does not look like you have enough hay or winter supplements available to carry you through winter, first develop a method to make the products on hand last as long as possible. This is another way to reduce winter feed cost, by ensuring that you aren't purchasing more than is required, which results in unnecessary expenses. If you choose to stretch your forages as long as possible, it is important to make sure your cattle are being productive and are in good BCS, as this serves as an easy tool in determining if your cattle are meeting their requirements. If productivity and/or BCS decrease in quality you should reassess and develop a new plan to improve these areas.

Although it may seem overwhelming at first, developing a plan for winter feeding may be one of the most cost effective things a producer can do in his cattle operation. Look at each of the areas in the operation that we discussed and do whatever needs to be done to ensure that they are all working productively together. Do not spend more on winter feed costs than necessary, but don't let the productivity of your herd decrease. For assistance with this, or if you have any questions about lowering winter feed cost, please contact us.

"Body Condition Score" July 24, 2012- http://www.hcvethospital.com/sites/site-4669/documents/BCS%2007.24.12.pdf

"BCS- Reproductive Impact" February 22, 2013- http://www.hcvethospital.com/sites/site-4669/documents/BCS-%20Reproductive%20Impact%2002.22.13.pdf