

UNL spreadsheet helps plan winter supplementation

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An online spreadsheet can help livestock producers choose economical winter supplements, said a University of Nebraska-Lincoln specialist.

Called the Feed Cost Cow-Q-Lator, the spreadsheet accounts not only for the cost of nutrients, but also for delivery cost, the cost of feeding the supplement and waste loss, said Aaron Stalker, beef range systems specialist at the West Central Research and Extension Center in North Platte. Producers can access the [spreadsheet](#).

Before calculating the least expensive feed supplement, producers must decide when it's time to supplement, Stalker said. That decision lies in whether or not the base diet is meeting the animal's requirements.

Although cattle's requirements and the nutrient content of forage changes throughout the year, cows grazing native forage are most likely to be deficient when forage is dormant. For the majority of Nebraska producers who calve in the spring, winter supplementation is likely to be economically beneficial.

On most dormant forage, protein is the first limiting nutrient, so that's the most likely nutrient to need supplementation. The next question might be availability of energy.

Fortunately, a lot of protein sources also contain energy, so when producers supply supplement, not only do they supply protein, but they also supply energy, so they cover both bases at once, Stalker said.

Frequently, trace minerals are deficient, especially copper and zinc, so a producer might consider adding minerals to the diet as well.

Often, producers think that certain sources of protein are better than others. That's rarely true, Stalker said. Most natural sources of protein are equivalent.

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“It’s analogous to comparing cars based upon the miles per gallon,” Stalker said. “What we want to do for the protein supplement is find out what’s the cost per pound of protein and buy the least expensive.”

To calculate the cost per unit of protein for a particular feed, divide the number of pounds of protein in a ton by the cost per ton. Or, for those who don’t want to do the math, try the UNL online toolbox to calculate all your feed costs.