

News Column

by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent
110 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, KS 66502

For Release 10/01/18
Phone: 785/537-6350
Fax: 785/537-6353

HOW MUCH HAY DOES A COW NEED?

I wonder if the folks at Wendy's would give me strange looks if I took a scale along to lunch and weighed the burger, fries, and chicken nuggets that come with my 4 for \$4 meal. It's a useless piece of information – I'll eat until I'm beyond full anyway – but I wonder what my daily consumption is, as a percentage of body weight.

I know it sounds like a random thought, but it didn't pop into my head randomly. Instead, I was doing some math to determine how much hay a cow will eat over the winter and my mind just took off.

Typical consumption for a cow is about 2.2% of body weight daily. For a 1,400 pound cow, that's 30.8 pound of feed per day, on a dry matter basis. If hay is 88% dry matter, then that 30.8 pounds of dry matter becomes 35 pounds of actual hay per day.

You know I like math, ... so I did more math. I multiplied by 30 days in a month to learn that my cow will eat 1,050 pounds of hay per month. Then I multiplied times four, figuring hay would be needed from January through April. My total is 4,200 pounds of hay per cow.

I figured just four months of feeding hay, assuming that most producers will get two months of grazing from milo or corn stalks. Then, they may need to feed hay from January through the end of April.

Astute cattlemen already know that the best way to reap a profit from a cow herd is to minimize feed costs. I'm not recommending under-feeding. Instead, I'm talking about getting

more days of grazing, utilizing crop residues or cover crops to avoid having to haul baled forages to the cow herd.

The math is pretty simple. Another two months of grazing could cut the winter hay bill in half.

OK. The math isn't really that simple. There is likely a cost for the two months of grazing, whether it be seed and equipment costs to plant a cover crop or rent paid to graze a neighbor's corn stalks. However, grazing stalks or cover crops should still be cheaper than buying and hauling hay.

If hay was just \$100 per ton this year – and I've heard prices a lot higher – you can figure about \$105 savings by grazing for two more months instead of buying hay. If you can rent stalks for \$.50 per head per day for 60 days, that's a real bargain.

While we use 2.2% of body weight as an average consumption for cows, consumption can vary tremendously. Intake of low quality feeds may be only 1.7% of body weight. On the other end of the intake scale, a lactating cow fed high quality feed may consume as much as 2.7% of her body weight.

Having cows only consume 1.7% of their body weight isn't a goal you're aiming for. If their consumption is that low, the feed isn't good enough and they will lose weight. In that situation, they need to be fed protein to increase their consumption.

Thirty-five pounds of hay seems like a lot, doesn't it? But, have you ever calculated how many pounds of water a cow drinks in a day?

Curiosity got the best of me again. A cow will drink between 14 and 28 gallons of water per day, depending on the weather. At 8.3 pounds per gallon of water, that's between 116 and 232 pounds of water per day.

Now I understand why cattle buyers pay so much attention to fill when they're bidding on cattle at the local auction barn.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.