



## FEBRUARY MANAGEMENT TIPS

Paul Walker, Livestock Extension Agent-Retired,

1. **Assess the body condition score of your cattle monthly and record what you see (written records or photographs, etc).**
  - Signs of poor nutrition include visible hookbones, backbones, and the last 3 ribs.
  - Poor nutrition during the early part of the winter causes the cattle to use their fat reserves which normally cover these bones.
  - If this poor nutritional level is not corrected, brood cows will start digesting muscle which is evidenced by a thinning of the muscles in the hindquarters. Once this starts, the cattle become weak, go down, and often die. Even if cattle managers realize what is going on and increase the nutritional level, it is often too late because the cattle didn't get this way over night. They did so over several months and it takes several weeks to months for the cattle to regain their body condition. Trying to save on feed costs will cost you more in the long run from decreased reproductive rates, and decreased weaning weights. With calves at \$2.00 + per pound, it won't take many pounds lost to pay for a large round bale of hay.
  
2. **Good nutrition starts with forage availability and quality.**
  - *Pasture: assess your grass.* Cattle cannot gain adequate nutrition from grass less than one inch in height. If your grass is not at least 3-4 inches in height, don't depend on it for grazing. Only a lucky few have grass in their pastures at this point in the winter that will meet these requirements.
  - *Hay: Don't let your brood cows run out of hay.* A common practice to stretch the hay supply is to wait a few days before refilling the hay rings after the cattle have consumed all the hay. This is the same as starving the cattle for a few days and is a bad practice. It can lead to the situation described above. If one does not have enough hay to adequately feed the cattle, they should 1) purchase more hay or 2) sell a few brood cows. With cattle worth in the thousands of dollars, they are well worth shelling out extra money for hay.
  - *Protect and prepare your pastures for the upcoming season.*
    - Late February to Early March is the time of year to fertilize fescue pastures. Fescue will start turning green at the end of February so giving it some nutrition in the form of fertilizer will give it the boost it needs after the long cold winter.

- Early February is the time to “frost seed” clover into pastures if needed.
- Coming out of the winter, cattle should be held off of pastures until the grass is at least 6 inches in height. This gives a chance for the grass to recover from the winter temperatures and will lead to better root development and stronger stands later in the spring/summer. Allowing the cattle to graze off the new green shoots of grass as they emerge from winter dormancy weakens the grass stand. Generally, in the Piedmont Region of North Carolina, grass will not reach 6 inches in height until late March or early April. So, have enough hay on hand to be able to feed through March. March is a “teaser month” with green grass, some warm temperatures, but enough cold days and nights to keep the grass from growing vigorously.

### **3. Assess your herd’s overall health.**

- Watch for signs of scours/pneumonia in calves. With wet, muddy, and cold conditions on the farms, calves have lots of opportunities to pick up bacteria which can lead to calf scours and pneumonia. Take a good look at the brood cows’ udders. Are they soiled and mud caked? If so, the herd needs to be moved to cleaner areas to help prevent the diseases just mentioned.
- The majority of beef cattle producers calve in October, November, and December. This means that January, February, and March are the breeding months. Observe the herd for signs of breeding activity. Is the bull searching for and finding the cows/heifers in heat? Is he breeding them? Are the cows/heifers cycling or are they too thin to cycle? Write down some cow/heifer numbers that you see getting bred and re-check them 18-21 days later to be sure they do not return to heat. If several females are returning to heat, you could have a sub-fertile bull. If this is the case, he needs to be checked. It is better to find it out now than at calving time next fall.

### **4. Continue to educate yourself!**

- Attend your local cattlemen’s association monthly meetings (contact your livestock extension agent for local meeting times, dates, places), the Piedmont Regional Beef Conference (Feb 24, Guilford Ag. Center 9:30am -5:00pm), and the North Carolina Cattlemen’s Beef and Dairy Conference, (Feb 12 – 14, Hickory Metro Convention Center, Hickory, N.C.).
- If you have questions concerning any of the above items, contact us at Mebane Tractor Feed & Seed. We carry a complete line of nutritional products for cattle, horses, sheep, goats, swine, and dogs. We do have access to limited supplies of hay if needed.