

Meeting Water Needs For Winter Grazing

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Late season and winter grazing can reduce your feed costs. Stockpiled forage makes good late season pasture. An acre of corn stalks will feed a beef cow for one to two months. Fencing and water are often the two obstacles to realizing these low cost opportunities. A temporary electric fence can effectively contain livestock. With cold weather and freezing temperatures, adjustments must be made to the watering systems.

Fortunately, nature provides for some of the water adjustments. Water requirements are reduced with cold temperatures. Animals will also eat snow to meet some, if not all, of their water needs.

Snow

Pregnant non-lactating females, such as beef dry cows, can readily adapt to this type of winter pasture. They have a much lower water requirement than lactating females. If the animals have access to clean fluffy snow, they will not require any additional water. Studies at the University of Alberta in the early 1990's showed that non-lactating pregnant females received adequate water from the snow, and produced as well as those animals that had access to water in a trough or water bowl.

When livestock are eating stockpiled forage, it is usually fairly high in moisture content and covered with snow. In the process of eating they are going to ingest a significant amount of snow. When these water sources are considered, along with the reduced requirement during the cold weather, the amount of extra water required is not as high as one would expect. The snow should be soft and fluffy so that the livestock can easily eat it. Hard, icy snow will scratch the animal's muzzle and discourage intake.

Water Sources

It may be practical for livestock to walk a greater distance to water than would be acceptable in warm weather because their water requirements are low. In cold weather, dry cows will likely only drink once or twice per day. There won't be as much time spent walking to water as in the summer when consumption is much higher. The herdsman can make effective use of a single water source and ration the stockpiled forage by starting the grazing close to the water and advancing the fence.

A solar or wind powered air bubbler system can be used to prevent a water trough or surface water source from freezing over. Using a water wagon to haul water is another possibility. The livestock water requirements are lower, so this option will be more practical than in the summer months.

Winter grazing will reduce the requirement for stored feed and reduce feed costs. Refer to articles on corn stover and stockpiled pasture on the OMAFRA Forage Website. By investing a few dollars in temporary electric fence and using snow as a water source, you will be able to utilize forage that would otherwise be lost to your operation.