

Drylotting Beef Cattle to Rest Exhausted Pastures

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Many producers are running out of winter feed supplies and are anxious to put cattle out on pasture. However, many drought stricken and overgrazed pastures from last summer may need more time to recuperate this spring to improve stand vigor. An alternative worth considering is drylotting your cows/calves or feeder cattle in a feedlot for the early part of the grazing season, provided you can find a feedlot with enough silage to spare.

Advantages of drylotting at this time include:

- More control of the herd for health and management
- Opportunity to improve cow body condition score prior to breeding for improved fertility and re-breeding success
- Easier synchronization and artificial insemination
- Increased number of cows per bull with natural service
- Allows for pasture or rangeland restoration
- Easier weaning since calves are used to eating out of feed bunks
- Potential lower cost of production with silage, straw, grain and by product feeds vs high priced hay

Disadvantages of drylotting at this time include:

- Higher level of management needed for ration balancing and herd health
- Possible increased crowding and associated stress
- Potential for more rapid spread of contagious diseases
- More challenging environment for cattle, with dust, mud, and flies present
- More harvested feed required for lactation and creep rations

Adequate nutrition is a must if cows are to produce milk to their genetic potential, return to estrus and rebreed within a yearly calving interval. A wide variety of feeds may be used to balance cattle rations. Consider feeding by-product feeds as part of the ration to stretch feed supplies and reduce costs. Such by-products feeds could include straw, screenings, mill run, and dried distillers grains with solubles. Many of these by-product feeds are in lower demand at this time of year and priced accordingly. Consider the cost per unit of energy and protein on a dry matter basis and include transportation and storage losses when comparing alternative feeds.

Work with your local nutritionist to feed test and balance rations according to cows milking ability, body condition, age and size. This will help provide the cattle with what they need without over or under feeding, and help to avoid feeding problems that can arise with diets high in sulfur or fat content with the use of dried distillers grains with solubles. Distillers grains should not be more than 1/3 of the diet on a dry matter basis. When feeding distillers grains or mill run no supplemental phosphorus will be required but additional calcium will be required.

Young, thin cows and first-calf heifers need a more nutrient dense diet and should be fed separately from the rest of the mature herd. Adequate pen and feeder space is required to prevent dominant cows from crowding out or preventing timid cows from eating. In general pen space should be a minimum of 500 square feet per pair, with 800-1,000 square feet desirable with less than optimum drainage. Bunk space should be 26-36 inches per cow to allow for limit feeding rations and bunks should be of high capacity to accommodate bulky cow feed. Additional pens may be required to expose cows to desired sires.

After breeding it may be desirable to sort cow/calf pairs by sex of calf so steer and bull calves can be offered a higher energy creep ration for faster gains and transition to the feedlot. Heifer calves should be offered a lower energy creep to reduce fat deposition in the udder which can reduce their lifetime milking ability as cows. Calves in drylot should be offered creep feed as early as two months of age.

Be sure to provide adequate water to cows and calves. Lactating cows can require up to 20 gallons of water per day.

If you are out of winter feed and wanting to allow your exhausted pastures more time to recuperate from drought and overgrazing last summer, drylotting your cattle for the early part of the grazing season may be a viable alternative. Data suggests that performance of calves and cows is similar whether they were drylotted or managed on pasture.

For more information on drylotting beef cattle check out the 'Drylot Beef Cow/Calf Production' guide from North Dakota State University <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/ansci/beef/as974.pdf> or read the Fact Sheet on the Drought on Grazing Livestock page on [foragebeef.ca](http://www1.foragebeef.ca/$foragebeef/frgebeef.nsf/all/ccf78) [http://www1.foragebeef.ca/\\$foragebeef/frgebeef.nsf/all/ccf78](http://www1.foragebeef.ca/$foragebeef/frgebeef.nsf/all/ccf78)

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