

Can you feed your pregnant cows so their steer calves gain more weight and more heifer calves get pregnant? Recent research suggests that proper supplementation pays off.

As winter forage quality declines and cow nutrient demands increase, wise operators feed protein supplements to assure healthy calves plus cows that will rebreed rapidly. But protein supplements are expensive, so we usually feed only what the cow needs to stay healthy.

New research, though, suggests that this strategy of minimizing input costs may overlook the impact supplements have on the future performance of the unborn calf.

Recent research has shown that properly supplementing the cow can increase profitability of the calf she's carrying. In one study, steers born from cows that received protein supplement while grazing winter range produced an extra 60 pounds of carcass weight per animal compared to steers from non-supplemented cows.

In other studies, the pregnancy rate of heifers calved from cows that received protein supplements while grazing corn residue or winter range was higher than heifers from non-supplemented cows. And steers from these supplemented cows graded choice more often.

This outcome, where supplementing protein to the cow improves the performance of her calves later in life is called fetal programming. It is thought to occur partly because cow nutrition affects development of fetal organs and muscles, which is highest during the last third of gestation. Since most winter feeding and grazing programs use forages that are low in protein, adequate supplementing can pay big dividends.

As your cows approach calving time, don't overfeed but also don't scrimp on the protein. Feed what is needed, both for the cow and her calf. You'll be money ahead.

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