

Before You Buy Feed

By Chris Shelley, GPA Livestock Extension Agent (chris.shelley@colostate.edu)

When forage enters dormancy this fall and winter, many producers purchase feedstuffs for animal consumption. If you are planning to buy livestock feed there are some things you should know that could save you money. Feedstuff purchases can make up a large majority of the costs associated with livestock production.

Livestock do not have a requirement for alfalfa, corn, or even grass. What they do need are the nutrients contained in them. By thinking about nutrients rather than feedstuffs, we can more effectively purchase feedstuffs and feed livestock. There are six nutrients that all livestock species need. They are water, carbohydrates, protein, fat, vitamins and minerals.

In most situations, you will have a choice on what feeds are available for purchase. It can be difficult to know what to buy and what your animals will need. A consultation with your county extension office can help you determine what nutrients your animals need and how much. Finding the animal requirements is the first step in any livestock-feeding situation.

After you know what nutrients you need, the next step is to see which feedstuff has those nutrients and at what price. Common feeds such as corn and alfalfa both have protein, but how much protein do they have and what is the price of the protein? Research has shown that nutrient concentration of feeds can vary dramatically, especially in by-product feeds. However, there are several methods to determine which nutrients your feed has and how much.

The visual appearance of the feed may give you an idea of the feed's nutrient content. The color of the feed is a great starting point. The green color in most hays is a good indicator of Vitamin A content. If hay contains a high amount of stems to leaves, that means the plant was more mature when harvested. This will generally increase the fiber content and decrease the protein. A good visual appraisal will be very valuable in assuring you that no weeds or foreign contaminants are present, that the moisture level is correct, and that there is no mold or mildew. It is important to keep in mind that these are not precise measurements and will not accurately predict nutrient content.

The most reliable and accurate method for assessing nutrients is through laboratory chemical testing. Many feed producers will have their feed analyzed prior to selling it. The tests are affordable and county Extension Offices have resources to help you collect and ship samples.

By breaking down feeds into their respective nutrients, the livestock feeder can then compare "apples to apples". Purchasing nutrients is much easier than purchasing feeds. It can still be difficult to know whether to buy alfalfa with 18 % crude protein at \$195 per ton or alfalfa with 19.5% crude protein at \$202 per ton. Colorado State University Extension has an easy to use feed and mineral calculator available online. Visit the Golden Plains Area Extension website at goldenplains.colostate.edu.

For a free nutritional assessment, contact Chris Shelley at 970-332-4151, chris.shelley@colostate.edu or your local Extension Office.