



# STRETCH FEED, PROTECT YOUR HERD IN A TOUGH YEAR

Nutrition drives profitability says this experienced specialist



Nutrition anchors a well-run beef operation says Melissa Atchison.

Any coach whose team hits a tough stretch knows turning things around takes a combination of new approaches and recommitting to critical basics.

Melissa Atchison expects a lot of beef producers will face those kinds of challenges on the feed front this year after some unusual weather. She applies that same coaching logic in stretching feed supplies. Look for new options and double-check core basics.

Atchison has lots of experience in the area. Her professional training is in animal nutrition. She spent time with Manitoba Agriculture as a livestock specialist. Today she works with the Verified Beef Production Plus (VBP+)

program and helps manage a family-owned 850-cow-calf and backgrounding operation at Pipestone, Man.

“The No. 1 thing affecting profitability is fertility and the No. 1 thing affecting fertility is nutrition,” says Atchison. Here is her checklist of key ways to stretch feed supplies and fundamentals that will protect the bottom line:

**Know options.** There are many standard options in tough years like straw or native plants like cattails and bulrushes. But you can get creative.

Drought years often lead to failed annual crops. For example, sunflower silage is two-thirds the nutritional quality of corn silage. Grain farmers may be willing to let you graze annual crop land. Potatoes make great feed if you are near a plant. Distillers grains or chaff are options.

Ammoniating straw works if handled with care and dramatically

improves intake and digestibility. So does molasses top dressed on bales, or liquid supplements. “A caution. There is a misconception that with the right supplements you can feed anything to cows, but the fact is no amount of protein can make up for inadequate energy,” she says.

**Contamination.** Check spray applications and product withdrawal times, noxious weeds and invasive species. Watch moulds. Some are benign, some very dangerous in small quantities to reproduction and herd health. Ergot can occur in cereal crops and screenings. It can be nasty but can be blended out.

**Feed test.** “Testing is huge especially with novelty feeds,” says Atchison. “There are lots of ballpark figures for conventional feeds but feed test novelty to pinpoint nutrition.”

**Minerals critical.** Some minerals can tie up absorption of other minerals. Consider some independent professional advice for building your mineral program.

**Preg check, wean early.** Consider bumping up time of weaning and preg checking to lighten the load on pastures and feed supply, and help out the cows.

**Know body condition.** Scoring is critical to feeding decisions. Consider asking your vet to body condition score when they preg check. It’s a fresh set of eyes and a way to objectively check scoring. Use feeding groups to save the best feed for heifers and older cows.

**Consider selling.** If feed is short at preg check, consider culling the bottom five per cent to 15 per cent of cows and anything over the age of 10 years to free up feed resources.

## VBP+ A COACHING TOOL

“VBP+ provides a solid coaching framework for management,” says Atchison. “And it positions you to participate in programs like the new Cargill Canadian Beef Sustainability Acceleration Pilot. It’s worth considering.”



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