

Ross Mosteller

District Extension Agent
Livestock & Natural Resources

Winter Mineral Nutrition

As I look back on some of my nutrition related articles recently, I see that I'm guilty of overlooking discussion that this article mentions in mineral supplementation. Mineral consumption in my cows has picked up as they are out on corn residue, so this has come to front of mind for me. Hopefully, you will find some takeaways from this article based on one originally written by Adele Harty, former SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist.

Winter supplementation often focuses heavily on meeting protein and energy requirements of cows and tends to leave mineral nutrition as almost an afterthought. In reality, meeting all nutrient requirements, including energy, protein, minerals, vitamins, and water are equally important. Missing the mark in any of these five nutrient categories can have equally negative effects. In reality, all nutrients interact, and deficiencies in mineral nutrition can create deficiencies in availability of other nutrients, even if those nutrients are adequate in the diet.

During winter months, locally grown forages are typically the basis of ruminant diets, and important considerations are the amount and availability of minerals in forages. Due to the drought, this year may be a very different situation with hay coming from different areas in the state or country. The amount of each mineral in the forage is based on mineral content of the soils they are grown on, which is highly variable because of variation in the geologic parent material the soils come from. This really speaks to the value of doing forage testing!

Not only does this affect mineral status from one region to another, but it can be highly variable on a local basis, to the point that mineral content of forages can vary from one pasture to the next. Additionally, mineral content and availability are not the same thing, with mineral interactions playing a key role. Another key characteristic of forages that drives mineral availability is digestibility. Higher quality forages that have higher digestibility will have greater availability of the minerals they contain than mature forages such as dormant winter range, crop residues, or CRP hay.

Due to drought conditions and ranchers having to utilize alternative forages, the mineral program that has worked in the past may not meet the mineral requirements of the animals this year. When speaking of forage mineral levels, typically calcium levels are adequate in forages and phosphorous levels tend to be low and often inadequate, especially in mature forages. Thus, phosphorous supplementation is often necessary, especially with low quality forages such as winter range, crop residues, or low-quality hay. Don't forget, the protein supplement used has to be evaluated for mineral content as well.

In general, mineral nutrition is challenging as minerals can interact with each other and can be antagonistic, meaning that they can bind with each other and reduce availability to the animal. In other words, sometimes an excess of one mineral has to be fed in order to overcome an antagonism. Secondly, excess minerals can cause toxicity and potentially death, therefore to overcome the antagonisms it is critical that minerals are not supplemented needlessly because of cost and toxicity concerns.

Minerals are important nutrients that need to be properly balanced in the diet. If dietary feedstuffs do not contain adequate minerals or contain an imbalance, then mineral supplementation is necessary. This is usually the case. However, mineral supplements are often expensive and careful attention to providing the right supplement can be key to ensuring that we get the biggest bang for the buck.