

Challenging the way we've always done things: Nutrition guidance for small farms that actually works for practitioners

W. Mark Hilton, DVM, PAS, DABVP (Beef Cattle)

Midwest Beef Cattle Consultants, LLC
West Lafayette, IN 47906

Abstract

Veterinarians are consistently ranked as one of the most important sources of nutritional information on beef farms.¹ Providing nutritional guidance for smaller beef farms should lead to improved herd nutrition, healthier, more productive cattle, decreased expenses for the producer, and improved revenue for the veterinary practice.

Key words: beef, nutrition, goals, business

Challenging conventional approaches to beef nutrition on small farms can be both innovative and effective. What strategies can be especially useful for veterinary practitioners working with small beef operations?

Changing our mindset

It is erroneous for veterinarians to assume that because a beef producer is categorized as a “small producer” that they will not be progressive. We need to ask our clients their goals to assess their potential for success with our veterinary business. Do not tell your clients what to do. No one likes being told what to do.

On a first time visit to a farm one of my goals is to learn about their business. Leading with, “Tell me about the Keitel agricultural business,” I find that people tend to begin with the things most important to them and this is valuable information for me.

Education of the veterinary team on beef nutrition

Many veterinarians and registered veterinary technicians have exposure to ruminant nutrition courses in their undergraduate studies and some have additional training in veterinary college. There are also numerous training opportunities to enhance our skills and provide this much needed guidance for our clients. Some examples include AABP in-person training, webinars and self-study. If you have taken a nutrition training course, highlight that fact in your clinic newsletter and/or add a note about it on your business website. This is an excellent marketing strategy for your nutrition consulting business.

Numerous basic to intermediate level computer programs are available that will guide you in formulating rations for various stages of beef production

Our goal is not to replace the other sources of nutritional guidance, especially beef nutritionists, but to supplement those sources with a non-biased, evidence-based approach to beef nutrition.

Understanding the unique needs of small beef farms

Small beef farms often have limited resources and may not have access to the same scale of nutrition solutions as larger operations. Tailoring nutrition advice to fit their specific conditions is crucial. Many will not have the ability to utilize large quantities of byproduct feeds with a limited shelf life, but that does not mean that they cannot source a similar product in dry form.

Forage quality and availability can vary significantly on small farms. Assessing and addressing the specific forage resources on each farm is essential.

Personalized nutrition plans

Conduct thorough nutritional assessments of the forage, available feedstuffs and the cattle. This includes evaluating quality (e.g., protein, energy and mineral content) and understanding the specific needs of the cattle. Never formulate a ration with “book values” for forages or silages. Always request a complete analysis from the nutrition company on all mineral and vitamin mixes.

Develop customized feed rations based on the feedstuff assessment and cost. Assess feedstuffs on a cost/unit of energy and protein on a dry matter basis using a feedstuff nutrient calculator (available at www.mwbeefcattle.com – educational material). Utilize software programs for ration formulation or consult with a nutritionist to create balanced diets tailored to the farm's specific conditions.

Need to “measure to manage”

Having the ability to accurately weigh animals periodically is invaluable for any beef business. Smaller producers may think they cannot afford a scale, but those that purchase one nearly always say they wish they would have done so sooner. Having an electronic scale with your portable chute you take to the farm can be an asset to the producer and your veterinary business.

Encourage the use of data collection for tracking animal performance, feed intake and health. This data can be invaluable for adjusting nutrition plans and improving outcomes.

Forage and feed management

You must have a forage/grazing specialist on your team. Encourage all your producers that have grazing animals to have a forage/grazing consultation visit with this expert to give recommendations on how to improve soil health, forage quality and quantity, extend the grazing season and potentially increase carrying capacity.

Always test forage for nutritional content to ensure it meets the needs of the cattle. Underfeeding wastes their investment in the animals and overfeeding wastes their money. There is zero chance that a forage will be exactly book value for every measurement.

Advise on best practices for forage and feed storage to prevent spoilage and nutrient loss. When large round or square bales are stored outside on the ground, most hay spoilage is in the bottom of the bale. The bale acts as a wick and pulls moisture from the soil into the bale increasing the spoilage of the bale. Storage on crushed stone, pallets, tires, etc. keeps the bale off of the soil surface.

Focus on health and efficiency

Being a veterinarian, this is a natural place to begin. Newer clients will likely have no idea of the breadth of your knowledge. Many think you are only a “fixer of broken cows”. Emphasize the role of proper nutrition in preventing health issues. Adequate nutrition supports immune function and reduces the risk of diseases.

Promote strategies that improve feed efficiency, such as feeding monensin to all animals. Decrease mud at feeding areas by utilizing hay pads (heavy use areas) and explain potential cost-share options with the National Resources Conservation Services (NRCS). Use time feeding of hay with an automatic gate opener like the Batt-Latch gate.

Client education and training

A key to having a progressive, successful veterinary practice is building a team of experts that will help your clients achieve their goals. Having a beef nutritionist that you can contact with more complex nutritional questions is paramount.

Provide training and resources for producers on modern nutrition practices, feed management, and the use of new technologies. Practical, hands-on workshops and field days where successful, innovative producers speak can be particularly effective. Producer-led pasture walks where they outline their successes and frustrations with Management-intensive Grazing (MiG) are particularly popular. Our veterinary business hosted a yearly field day at one of our farms where the owner had made a positive change for their business, and this was tremendously successful for our business. Our clients learned how to improve their business, and we were seen as the clinic that helped our clients succeed.

Offer ongoing support and consultation at your hourly consultative fee to address any issues that arise and to continuously improve nutrition strategies.

Sustainable practices

Encourage sustainable practices that optimize resource use, such as incorporating Management-intensive Grazing (MiG). This can enhance forage quality and reduce reliance on purchased feeds.

Consider the environmental impact of feed practices and promote strategies that reduce waste and emissions. Explaining that feeding monensin reduces methane production by 15% in beef cattle will be significant to several producers.² Areas of unexpected knowledge tend to build trust with the client, and this allows the veterinarian to assume a greater role in guidance and consulting.

Research and innovation

Keep abreast of research and advancements in beef nutrition. New findings can provide insights into more effective or efficient feeding strategies.

Explore and recommend innovative nutrition solutions, such as alternative feed ingredients that could benefit small-scale operations. Utilizing byproduct feeds such as wet brewers grains, bakery waste and unsold sweet corn from local businesses can be an excellent alternative to these products going to the landfill.

Marketing

Feeding an animal from birth to slaughter or from purchase as a feeder calf to slaughter can be a unique marketing advantage for the smaller producer. Consumers like knowing where their food comes from and how it was fed. Educating consumers about cattle being nature's upcyclers where they consume human inedible products like corn crop residue, stockpiled forage and ethanol byproducts can be quite enlightening. Explaining that many of the other feedstuffs that the cattle consume were grown on the same farm where the cattle were raised can also be a positive marketing strategy.

Accepting change

While the initial emphasis on becoming a trusted advisor to your clients on nutrition is vital, getting producers to accept change can be challenging. Some strategies you can consider:

1. **Communicate effectively.** We need to look for clues in the dialogue with the producer to initiate the discussion. Use and open-ended questions like, “tell me more about your frustration with the cost of feeding your calves”. Clearly explain how the change will benefit the owner and their cattle. Address their concerns and be open to discussions. Any of their concerns are an opening for a discussion.
2. **Involve them in the process.** People are more likely to accept change if they feel involved and valued. Seek their input, listen to their ideas, and incorporate their feedback. Look for tidbits of information where you can utilize their words to emphasize a point of importance. Example: If a client says, “I am tired of making hay all summer,” you can respond, “Oh, so you dislike all the time spent making hay? What if we could find ways to reduce the need to bale all that hay?”
3. **Sequential request strategies in persuasion suggest that by securing initial agreement** (often through easier or more agreeable questions), **the likelihood of subsequent agreement to more challenging or different perspectives increases.** This is partly because of the commitment and consistency principle, where people strive to act consistently with their prior behavior.³ I call this asking “yes” questions.
4. **Highlight the positives.** Emphasize the potential benefits and opportunities that the change will bring. Help them see how it aligns with their goals.
5. **Lead by example.** Show your own commitment to the change and demonstrate how you are adapting. Your attitude and behavior can influence others positively.
6. **Address resistance.** Understand that resistance to change is normal. Identify the root causes of resistance and address them constructively.

-
7. **Give time.** Change can be unsettling, and people may need time to process and adjust. Be patient throughout the transition period. Think of a time you made a positive change. It likely took time. Be patient.
 8. **Celebrate milestones.** Acknowledge and celebrate progress and achievements related to the change. This reinforces positive behaviors and attitudes.
 9. **Monitor and adapt.** Keep communication channels open and monitor how the change is being received. Be prepared to adjust based on feedback and outcomes.

Ask others that have made a positive change if you can use their name to tell others about this. It is a win-win situation. The client that previously changed feels honored and the client wanting to change now has a mentor.

By employing these eight strategies, you can increase the likelihood that someone will accept and adapt to change more effectively.

By adopting a more personalized, data-driven, science-based and sustainable approach to beef nutrition, veterinary practitioners can help small beef farms enhance productivity and profitability while enhancing their veterinary business.

References

1. Dargatz, David. Beef'97, Part I: Reference Of 1997 Beef Cow-Calf Management Practices. (1997).
2. Cooke, Reinaldo F., et al. An updated meta-analysis of the anti-methanogenic effects of monensin in beef cattle. *Transl Anim Sci* 8 (2024): txae032.
3. Cialdini RB. *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. Vol. 55. New York: Collins, 2007.
4. OpenAI. (2023). *ChatGPT* [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com>

