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Shall We Self-Feed Cattle?

SELF-FEEDING cattle has been considered a labor-saving practice in the past and may therefore increase this year. However, C. C. Culbertson, who is in charge of feeding experiments at the Iowa Station, doubts the value of self-feeding cattle to save labor.

According to him, the value of self-feeding is rather that it allows a better distribution of labor and prevents irregularities in feeding which may result from pressure of work. Self-feeders with large hoppers need be filled only at intervals of a week or ten days. Therefore the farmer who is quite busy with field work or other tasks can do the chores on slack days or in between other jobs, whenever it is handy.

On farms where working hours are irregular and chore time is likely to be equally irregular, self-feeding may be an advisable practice. Cattle do best when fed at regular hours, and self-feeding gives them a chance to eat when they want feed.

In two experiments carried out at Iowa State College, self-fed steers gained an average of 0.4 pound daily more than hand-fed steers that were on full feed in one test and 0.13 in the other. Also, their gains were made at a slightly lower feed cost. Work at other stations also indicates that the difference in feed costs between the two methods is small.

Some farmers fear that they will have trouble with cattle going off feed now that inexperienced help may have to be used for chore work. They have been wondering whether self-feeding would be the answer to this problem. Culbertson states that there is little danger of getting cattle ‘stuck’ when they are on limited grain rations if the person feeding is told how much to give the cattle.

Full-feeding by hand, however, requires good management backed by experience and daily attention. Inexperienced help cannot be safely used for full-feeding. The farmer who makes money feeding cattle sends the hired man into the field and does the chores himself. “The eye of the master fattens the cattle.”

If supplements or a mixture of grains is fed, grinding may be necessary to get an even mixture. This means added work and expense, and perhaps the difference between profit and loss.

Even with shelled or cracked corn, careful adjustment of the self-feeder is necessary to get a proper flow of grain into the trough. Cattle will mess over a too large supply of grain in their trough and finally refuse it. If insufficient feed comes into the trough, the feeding will be limited, and the cattle will not get enough grain.

Can Fatten on Silage

For limited grain feeding, Culbertson advises a full feed of corn silage, and a limited feeding of legume hay as well as grain. Silage makes the greatest possible amount of beef from each acre of corn, and we may need all the feed we can get this year. Many seedings were damaged last winter. Silage can replace some of this lost roughage as well as provide some of the corn necessary to finish cattle. In fact, the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station has successfully fed out steers using silage and legume hay with no added grain. Silage from some of the high-yielding hybrid corn varieties may contain as much as 20 percent grain. A heavy feed of good corn silage would give the cattle considerable grain.

The finish obtained in limited grain feeding is not as good as with full feeding. However the last gains put on cattle always take more feed, and, unless a premium is paid for highly finished cattle, more profit may at times be obtained from partly finished steers than from those that top the market.

Hog mange is caused by a mite which lives beneath the skin and causes intense irritation. A portable wallow in which hogs may dip themselves will save labor in controlling the disease. A leaflet entitled “Portable Hog Wallow,” which includes a picture and plans for the equipment, can be obtained through county extension directors or from the Agricultural Extension Service, Iowa State College, Ames.

By ANTHONY MATHIS