

Water Requirements and Quality Issues for Cattle

Water is the most important nutrient for cattle. Water accounts for 50 to 80% of an animal's weight and is involved in every physiological process. Cattle cannot adapt to water restriction and feed intake will be greatly decreased if water is restricted. If cattle are not eating they are not growing or producing at a desirable level.

The amount of water an animal needs each day is dependant upon size, stage of production, condition, and average daily temperature. **Water requirements double when temperature increases from 50 to 95 degrees F.** Cows and bulls will need 15 to 20 gallons of water per day during the summer months. A lactating cow will need about 75% more water than a dry cow. Growing cattle need about 1 to 1.5 gallons of water per hundred pounds of body weight. Diet also affects the amount of additional water an animal will need everyday. Cattle grazing lush growth that contains 75% water will need much less additional water than cattle fed dry feeds or hay containing only 10% water.

Water temperature can also affect cattle performance. Cool water helps cattle maintain proper body temperature and leads to increased water intake. Shallow ponds or small water troughs can heat up in the summer and lead to decreased water intake. Deep ponds and groundwater pumped into large water tanks do not generally heat up enough to affect water intake.

Water is the most important nutrient for cattle, but providing clean water for cattle is often overlooked. **Research has shown weight gain increases from 5 to 20% in nursing calves provided water pumped into a tank verses calves drinking pond water.** Poor water quality can lead not only to poor performance that goes unnoticed, but can be deadly as well. Special attention should be given to water quality during the hot summer months when most problems occur.

Johnny Rossi
Extension Animal Scientist