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Free Choice Mineral: 10 Tips

By Jason Warner and Wendie Powell

Minerals and vitamins are a challenging aspect of livestock nutrition. Plant mineral and vitamin contents are influenced by multiple factors; soils, water and growing conditions. These environmental influences change between fence lines and daily, it seems. Therefore, each mineral supplementation plan must be created strategically. Here are ten tips to help with free choice mineral plans.

- 1) **Recognize the nutrient pecking order.** Energy and protein have higher priority than minerals and vitamins. When reproduction or performance concerns arise, mineral or vitamin status is often suspected first. But these should be considered only after energy and protein have been determined as adequate.
- 2) **Make a purchase plan.** Accurately budgeting a long-term supply can avoid under- or over-purchasing. While this can be a daunting task, the benefit will be reflected in the operation's bottom line. A feed service provider can help estimate amounts based on product design.
- 3) **Measure usage.** Record when and how much mineral is offered and track consumption for each pasture. A wide range in actual consumption may be observed, but look for an average and compare to labeled feed instructions.
- 4) **Understand consumption factors.** Proximity to water, resting areas, supplementation of other feedstuffs, precipitation, feeder design, and number of animals per feeder all drive consumption up or down. A high level of magnesium is typically associated with decreased intake. However, salt may either stimulate or inhibit consumption.
- 5) **Read, understand and follow label directions.** Comprehension is always important, but especially so with medicated minerals. Know, and follow, the medication dosage and use details.
- 6) **Calculate custom product options.** Accurate forage and water analyses can aid in the formulation of custom products. After considering volume minimums, product quality and consistency; decide if a custom blend would be economical for your operation.

7) **Focus on calcium and phosphorus.** Similar to energy and protein, an animal's calcium and phosphorus requirement fluctuates throughout the year, based on gestation phase and forage quality.

8) **Keep salt in mind.** Depending on an animal's nutrient requirement, and the free choice mineral supplement, additional salt may not be needed. Understanding animal need and the mineral label can save money.

9) **Consider trace mineral efficiency.** The feed ingredient market has several sources for trace minerals and all have a proper use to be effective. A feed service provider can help you navigate the list of products when you are making a purchase plan.

10) **Avoid overconsumption.** While underconsumption can be costly if deficiencies arise, overconsumption occurs more frequently, reducing profit margins.

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