

Free Choice Mineral: When, Where and How Much

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Spring burning, April showers, and green grass means a new season is upon us in Greenwood County. Several area producers are in the midst of spring calving, or receiving custom summer grass cattle. One area of importance for both the cow-calf producer, and the stocker operator is their cattle mineral program.

Having a strong year-around mineral program is important for cattle health, fertility and reproduction. It can also serve as an important barrier to insects, disease, and heat stress if fed with an IGR or CTC.

Please keep the following list of reminders in mind when it comes to developing, or tweaking your cattle mineral program.

1. **Measure intake to help plan your needs.** Record when and how much mineral is being put out for a group of cows and track consumption on a pasture or group basis. Remember, while we may observe a wide range in actual consumption we are targeting an average per label directions. Typically a daily consumption target for cattle mineral ranges from 2 to 4 oz, dependent on the product.
2. **Focus on Ca and P.** Calcium and phosphorus are two of the most important macro minerals, and requirements for the beef cow change throughout the year similar to energy and protein. The P requirement for a 1,200 lb lactating cow grazing a forage containing on average 0.2% P (DM basis) would be exceeded by 4 oz/hd/day of a mineral containing 6% P, thus providing some margin if forage is of lower P content than assumed.
3. **Keep salt in mind.** If a free choice mineral supplement contains 25% salt, 4 oz/hd/day of consumption would provide 28 g/hd/day of salt or 11 g/hd/day of sodium which would meet the sodium requirements of a typical beef cow. Therefore, feeding a product containing $\geq 25\%$ salt would not require additional free choice salt to be fed based on meeting the sodium needs of a beef cow.
4. **Read, understand, and follow label directions.** It is always important, but particularly with medicated minerals that one clearly understands the label. If medicated, you need to know 1) what the product is medicated with 2) what the dosage is and units used are and 3) the intended use of the product.
5. **Both management and ingredients used impact consumption.** Proximity to water and resting areas, water source, supplementation of other feedstuffs, precipitation, feeder design, and number of animals per feeder all drive consumption, either positively or negatively.