

How much water does a cow need?

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An animal's need for water varies with type of animal and production level, as well as environmental conditions. Proper amounts of good, clean water are important for the health and productivity of the animal. This article will address quantity and quality of water for livestock, and using water to control grazing.

Water Quantity Requirements

The quantity of water required varies with type of animal, including age and size, and production cycle. For example, lactating animals consume more water than non-lactating (dry cows). The environment also influences water intake. Hotter, summer temperatures increase water intake. Also, as the forage in the pasture dries out, the water intake will increase. This is because the animals are getting less water from fresh green grass that has higher water content than drier, more mature grass. Table 1 lists the average and range of water requirements that you can use as guidelines. Check water frequently to ensure a good supply.

Water Quality Requirements

Water quality needs are more complex than quantity of water required. Water quality indicators include salinity (salts dissolved in water), hardness (calcium and magnesium levels), pH (acidity or alkalinity), individual minerals (sulfate, nitrate, etc.), and potentially toxic substances (arsenic, barium, and other metals). Health and performance of livestock is not harmed with water that is a lower quality than is safe for human consumption, but there are limits. If you suspect problems,

learn more about this subject and test your water. For publications on water quality and water testing laboratories, contact you local Extension Office.



Table 1. Water Requirements of different classes of livestock

Animal	Water requirement (gallons/day)	Range of consumption (gallons/day)
Dairy cow	20	15 – 25
Cow-calf pair	15	12 – 20
Yearling cattle	10	6 – 14
Horse	10	8 – 14
Sheep	2	2 – 3

Source: Watering Systems for Grazing Livestock, Great Lakes Grazing Network and MI State Univ.

Grazing Management

While water is a critical requirement of the animal, it can also be an effective livestock management tool. Alternative water sources can be used to improve uneven pasture utilization occurring as a result of terrain and vegetation quantity and quality, and draw the animals away from a popular gathering area, such as a road, stream, or other commonly used area. Livestock often prefer off-stream water sources. It usually takes them less energy to get to and may be of higher quality than in-stream water. This may help maintain healthy stream bank conditions.