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Rolling into the Forage Market

Cattlemen are increasingly turning to value-added distillers grains products from SweetPro Feeds

By [Holly Jessen](#) | January 16, 2012

Bob Thornberg, president of SweetPro Feeds, isn't exactly surprised by the company's 45 percent increase in business from 2010 to 2011. He's surprised it took more than two decades to really catch on. "We had expected it to happen at a rate 10 years faster than this, but now what we're seeing is a bigger total prospective market than we would have thought," he says. "We would have expected to top out but now we are seeing no limits."

SweetPro Feeds has two production facilities, in Walhalla, N.D., and Horton, Kan., and, if the current demand holds up, has plans to expand. The company produces feed supplements for livestock including calves, cattle, sheep and horses. All its products contain distillers grains as a carrier, providing binding and aroma. Using the coproduct from ethanol production as a medium for vitamins, minerals, yeast and enzymes provides benefits that traditional molasses licks don't. "We understand this feed is just tremendous but it has taken the market much longer to understand how much better it is than molasses," he says. "They were just so steeped in molasses that it's been hard to change some of that traditional thinking."

First, molasses licks melt in extreme heat, which was a factor this summer during drought conditions, especially in areas such as Texas and Oklahoma, Thornberg says. Another big benefit is that distillers grains is more easily digestible for ruminant animals because it's a pre-fermented product. A university-led feeding trial showed that in a maintenance diet, a beef cow will eat 25 percent less hay when supplemented with SweetPro compared to no supplements.

In most of the dairy and cattle feeding industries, distillers grains is fed as a raw energy source. "Our approach is really quite different—it's not a high percentage of the diet," Thornberg says. "It's just part of the carrier to deliver their vitamin and mineral supplement, but it gives them a boost that keeps that microbial population such that they digest their forage better."

The beef cow-calf industry is "getting their own groceries" in a pasture, he points out. In order to reach this market, the company came up with a way to solidify distillers grains so it can be brought to the animals. "We're delivering kind of a one-two punch," he says. "It's not just a way to get the vitamins and minerals into them, it's also a way to deliver extra protein and it's given them a digestive benefit that helps them get more value out of the limited forage that they have."

The ultimate result is putting more pounds on pasture, a phrase the company has trademarked. "When they are doing the normal feeding, if they use our product, instead of their normal mineral supplement, they will gain about one-tenth of a pound faster, per day," he says. "Our view is that the beef cow producer is really in a good position to capitalize on this," he says. "Because they can supplement their cow and wean a heavier calf and then keep that calf longer and use our tubs on those calves and just grow them faster. It's a big dynamic change in the cattle producing industry; and we're well positioned to help the producers take advantage of distillers grains."

The idea for distillers grains livestock licks germinated in the mid-'80s when Thornberg was the manager of the ethanol plant in Walhalla, now owned by Archer Daniels Midland Co. At the time, distillers grains was easier to sell overseas because buyers in the local market didn't know what the product or its benefits were. "There was no product awareness for one, but more so, the range cattle people couldn't use distillers grains as an ingredient in feed," he says. "So it needed to be put in a form that could be used in pasture and for nonbunkfed cattle."

After developing a way to solidify distillers grains and other ingredients, the feed company got its start in 1991. The company secured six patents for its products between 1994 and 2004. Now, with sales growing, SweetPro Feeds is considering building a third, and possibly a fourth, production facility. "If we stay at that 45 percent, we're going to need to have a facility in place probably by 2013," Thornberg says. "One more year at this growth rate and we would be maxed."

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A SweetPro Feeds lick using DDGS as a carrier adds both vitamin and minerals to supplement forages and helps poor pastures go further.

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