



The Problem with Salt Blocks

By Jackie Nix

Many cattle producers unwittingly sabotage their mineral supplement program by providing plain white or yellow salt blocks in addition to loose mineral supplements or mineral blocks. For years popular wisdom was to provide salt blocks to livestock. However, now complete mineral and vitamin supplement products are available that contain necessary levels of salt. This article is meant to educate cattle producers on proper mineral management and nutrition.

Consumption of mineral supplements is regulated by several different factors including: salt content, hardness, molasses content, and “other” factors. Salt is added to a mineral mix not only to meet the salt needs of cattle, but also to mask other bad tasting ingredients and to maintain proper consumption. For instance, magnesium oxide is very unpalatable to livestock. Salt, along with other ingredients are often added to cover the unpleasant taste and to boost consumption.

Salt is added to a mineral mix to encourage consumption, but it is also added to limit consumption. As an example, think about an order of French fries, doesn't some added salt make it taste better and encourage you to eat more? What happens if you accidentally spill an open saltshaker on these same French fries? When they have too much salt, you will tend to eat less of them and may forgo eating them at all. The same principles apply for livestock mineral supplements.

Now you ask, what does this have to do with salt blocks? When white or yellow salt blocks are provided along with a complete mineral supplement, cattle may get all of their salt from the salt blocks and consume none of the complete mineral supplement. Or, more likely, they will consume some of both. While they do get some mineral supplement in this instance, they usually will not receive as much as they need. When you buy a mineral supplement, you will find a set of feeding instructions on the label. The desired consumption rate listed on the label is the rate that is formulated to deliver the full compliment of mineral supplement. For example, if the desired consumption of a mineral is 4 oz. per head per day, the presence of salt blocks may decrease consumption of this mineral to 2 oz per head per day. Let's also say that this mineral is designed to deliver 100% of the daily-recommended allowances for trace minerals. In this case, the cattle would have only half of their trace mineral needs met by this feeding scenario and in time could develop mineral deficiencies, especially in selenium and copper.

In all cases, it is important that you read and follow the label directions for any livestock supplement. NEVER provide additional sources of salt to cattle receiving free choice complete mineral supplements unless the product label specifically instructs you to do so. In rare instances, some supplements do recommend that you provide additional salt.

The cost of a good complete mineral supplement represents a significant cost in cattle production. You invest this money with the knowledge that your investment will pay off in improved herd health and increased productivity. To add salt blocks that decrease the effectiveness of your complete mineral supplement significantly decreases the value of your investment.

Sweetlix[®] offers many complete mineral and vitamin supplement products for cattle. Please visit www.sweetlix.com to view in more detail the line of Sweetlix[®] supplement products available. Ask for Sweetlix[®] by name at your local feed dealer or call 1-800-325-1486 to find the nearest Sweetlix[®] dealer near you.

No matter what mineral supplement you choose to purchase and utilize, protect your investment dollars by reading and following the label feeding directions. Avoid allowing cattle access to white or yellow salt blocks unless the mineral supplement specifically states to do so.

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