

THE FORAGER

Agronomics with livestock in mind!

Plan Now for Winter Forage

The fall harvest is underway and in many locations it has already been completed. However, there are a few other things to consider when it comes to planning and being prepared for winter forage programs. A little effort now can pay big dividends later on. Following are a few forage management practices to help reduce costs, improve cattle performance and increase profit potential. While they may not all be applicable to every situation, they provide some ideas that can help this winter.

Stockpile Tall Fescue: If a producer grazes cows... stockpiling tall fescue has the potential to add approximately 60 more days on to the fall grazing season. This will be 60 days that no hay will have to be fed. Stockpiling is nothing more than trying to save forage while it is growing for use later in the season. Research has shown that the fall growth of tall fescue is high quality, and the quality stays high into the winter, providing an excellent feed for cows. The steps to stockpiling are simple. Early in the fall have the pastures grazed or clipped to remove all of the mature summer forage. Apply 60 units of nitrogen/acre after the fall rains begin, and then allow the fescue to grow as long as possible, even up to a killing frost. Ammonium nitrate is the best nitrogen source to use in the fall. If possible, rotationally graze the fescue, so that less of the forage is trampled and wasted. Even though the nitrogen expense is significant, it is still quite a bit less expensive than having to feed hay for the extra 60 days. This is more applicable in the southern states.

Reduce Hay Storage Losses: One of the best ways to make hay inventories last longer is by wasting less of the hay that is on hand. Most producers would agree that a 5x5 bale that sits outside during the winter will have approximately six inches of rotted forage around the outside. But most producers do not realize that the six inches of loss is 30% of the bale. This is the same thing as taking every third bale out of the field and throwing it into the ditch, because no value is coming from it. If bales are stored inside, or off the ground and covered, we can make the hay supplies go farther because less hay will be lost due to rotting. If possible, store hay inside a barn. This will do the best job possible protecting the hay from the elements. If barn space is not available, get the hay off the ground by putting it on crushed stone, tires, poles, etc. There will be as much hay lost because of water taken up from the bottom of the bale as from rain damage. The next step is to cover the bales with some sort of plastic. Several types of hay tarps are available, and have been shown to be relatively durable and effective. Be sure to tie the tarps down securely. One of the best ways to do this is by laying ropes down and placing the bales on top of the ropes. These ropes can then be used to anchor the tarps. Be sure to not completely cover the ends of the hay stacks. If there is not any air movement up and down the stack under the tarp, there could be a significant amount of mold development on the hay.

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Forage Test Hay: In order to be efficient with your winter hay in a feeding program, test the hay to learn the protein and energy level. Without this information, there is no way to know if a cow's diet will be sufficient to meet her needs. Don't assume that all bales are equal. Different cuttings of hay will be different quality, depending on when they were cut, how much fertilizer was applied, the curing conditions, etc. A sample of every bale is not necessary, but a representative sample from each different cutting will provide valuable information. Various labs provide the moisture, fiber, protein, and TDN content of sampled hay. Being proactive before winter can help to maintain a forage program throughout the coming winter months.

(Edited from an article by Gary Bates, Professor and Extension Forage Specialist, U of Tennessee)

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PROPER STORAGE MANAGEMENT IMPROVES SILAGE QUALITY

It takes both high-quality forage and excellent silage management to equal high-quality silage. But of all the factors that go into silage production, producers have the most control over storage (Kung, U of DE). With proper storage, producers can improve silage quality and, therefore, improve milk production.

Measuring silage quality in terms of dry matter (DM) content, says Kung, is important to manage the loss of DM during storage from respiration, fermentation, seepage and exposure to air. Some losses are still likely, but mitigating those losses down to 10%-15% will help improve net farm income. Kung shares these tips to ensure silage is stored properly to maintain DM loss and increase overall silage quality:

- Fill bunkers quickly, pack tightly and use heavy equipment – pack to about 14-16 lbs of DM/cubic feet for optimum fiber digestibility; layers should be 6-8 inches thick; add weight to tractors (or additional tractors) if necessary
- Cover silage with plastic and tires (to keep air from entering) as soon as possible – white plastic is better than black plastic, as white helps keep the silage from getting too hot; consider plastic tarps with an oxygen barrier
- More tires or gravel bags filled with pea gravel help keep the cover edges from leaking air
- The length of storage increases fiber digestibility

Not only does proper silage storage increase silage quality and, therefore, improve milk production, it is one of the key items to help increase net farm income!

(Edited from Mycogen's Let's Talk Agronomy; July 2009)