

Time for Fall Feed Inventory

After several long, hot dry summers with forage shortages and high grain prices, 2013 has brought some relief. As we enter fall, it is time to assess where we stand with current forage inventories and develop a plan to optimize their utilization given today's feed market.

For several years we've restricted forage consumption due to scarcity and premium prices. It is time to reassess our nutrition programs by continuing to follow a systematic approach to forage management.

Step 1: Inventory your current forage supply. Analyze all forages for nutritional value. Use the results to designate which forages will be used for which animals.

Step 2: Work with your nutritionist to determine how much forage you are going to need to feed your herd, including replacements and dry cows, during the coming year. You can get a ball park estimate of the minimum amount of forage dry matter you need to feed your herd by using the following equations:

- 1) *Pounds of DM/day for Cows = (1.5 % of Bodyweight/day) * Number of Cows*
- 2) *Pounds of DM/day for Heifers = (1.1 % Bodyweight/day) * Number of Heifers*
- 3) *Total Pounds of DM Needed for Herd = (Pounds of DM/day for Cows + Pounds of DM/day for Heifers) * Number of Days Need to Feed*

For example, if the average bodyweight of a 100 cow herd was 1400 pounds, the herd would need $(1400 \text{ lbs} * .015/\text{d}) * 100 \text{ cows} = 2100 \text{ lbs}$ of forage dry matter per day just for the cows. If the herd has 90 heifers of all ages that average 700 lbs the herd will need an additional $(700 \text{ lbs.} * .011/\text{d}) * 90$ or 693 lbs of forage dry matter per day for the heifers. If you estimate it will be 250 days until you'll be able to get more forage from a winter crop you'll need $(2100 + 693) * 250 = 698,250$ pounds of forage dry matter.

To determine how much hay that would be on an as fed basis, divide the pounds of forage dry matter needed by the percent dry matter in the hay. For example, if the hay is 88% dry matter, you need $698,250/.88 = 793,466 \text{ lbs}$ or nearly 400 tons to feed your dairy cows and heifers for the 250 days.

This year you have two choices. Maximize the use of high quality forages in the lactating ration to minimize grain requirements or continue to feed the minimum amount you must have to keep the animals healthy. The latter option allows you to rebuild a forage inventory to prepare for future droughts. Work with your nutritionist to determine which method works best for you.

Step 3: If you're still short on forages this year, locate forages and high fiber by-product feeds. Again, work with your nutritionist to determine how you can optimize your forages with products such as beet pulp, soy hulls, corn cobs or other fibrous products that you don't typically use. Analyze these feeds as well so you can get the most out of them. Test, don't guess.

Step 4: Compare how much forage you need to what you have. If you have sufficient forages, you might decide to grow your heifers yourself rather than outsourcing them as some did during the severe drought. It may be better to continue sending heifers somewhere else to feed rather than bring feed to them if you are still short on forages this year.

Also, evaluate the cows in your milking herd. Even though feed may be more available, you should still cull those cows that aren't producing enough to cover their feed costs.

Step 5: Continue to conserve the forages you do have. Reduce shrink by storing hay in barns if possible. For hay stored outside, locate it in a well-drained location or on a gravel pad to reduce losses. Consider tarping the hay to further reduce rain damage.

Mother Nature continually provides challenges. Some of the lessons learned during the past couple of years of drought might be beneficial to continue. Make systematic decisions, rather than acting on impulse. Although we aren't back to "normal", this year's growing season at least affords us the opportunity to explore alternatives and pick what makes sense for individual operations.

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