

Livestock Producers have Options for Dealing with Forage Shortage

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This summer's pending drought in the northern Great Plains is forcing many livestock producers to reassess how they feed and manage their herds.

Forage shortages are one of the many cost-related challenges they face as drought conditions in much of North Dakota.

Planning for forage supply problems now could save you money later this year, says North Dakota State University Extension Service dairy specialist J.W. Schroeder.

He has this advice for producers on coping with declining forage supplies:

- Assess your forage supply reserves. What do you have on hand? What can you reasonably expect to harvest?
- Don't sell corn silage short. Supplemented with protein, it may be an attractive alternative to alfalfa.
- Review what's available locally. Only one-fourth to one-third of your forage needs to be top quality (150 to 170 relative feed value) to maintain herd productivity. As much as 75 percent of your forage can come from stocks of mid-quality hay and even some low-quality hay.
- Consult your feed company representative or nutritionist. This is critical. Once you start altering your rations by using mid-quality forages and bypass protein, knowing how ingredients fit together is essential. Grass, for example, is low in total protein, but most of the protein is bypass. Soybean meal or another digestible protein source will do nicely.
- Be creative. With your nutritionist's help, a little creativity can save you money. Once you have determined your needs, you have lots of ways to feed cows. Since commercial hay prices are running high, you may want to pursue supplies of alternative roughage, such as malt sprouts, wheat middlings and other protein sources such as corn gluten feed and distillers grains.
- Cull your herd wisely. Evaluating each cow to determine if it is pulling its weight becomes especially important when feed costs rise. Establish firm criteria for what cows need to produce.

However, producers who decide to feed commodities need to be aware of some issues, Schroeder cautions. One is feed value. Corn gluten feed, for example, is high in total protein, but it is mostly degradable protein that will need to be supplemented with bypass protein, such as roasted soybeans. Distillers grains have double the bypass protein of corn gluten feed and could be a better deal, even if it is more expensive.

"Remember that commodity feeds don't replace forages; they only supplement them," he says. "But they will help you extend your forage supplies by as much as 20 percent." Producers also

need to know that commodities typically are sold by the semi truckload, an amount that is not feasible for smaller operations, he says. He recommends that several producers in one area requiring forage purchase a load of the commodity jointly.

Another issue is the variability of nutrient and moisture content of byproduct feeds. Dairy producers need to watch each load and consistently moisture test, Schroeder says. Feed value will vary not only among commodity production plants, but among shifts at one plant, especially when the shift is just going online.

A list of regional byproducts is available on Schroeder's Web site at www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/aginfo/dairy/. Click on Nutrition, then scroll down to Byproducts and click on Partial List of North Dakota Co-products, Sources and Prices. Producers who find what they want on the list should call the plant to make sure the product is available because the demand is high and some plants may be out of byproducts or have commitments to long-term contracts.

Dairy producers should be aware of some drawbacks when used in dry-cow programs, according to Schroeder. The program usually involves feeding cows 3 to 5 pounds of grain with medium-quality forage free-choice. The program is meant to maintain the cow's body condition, balance minerals to prevent milk fever and provide a bulky diet to exercise the digestive tract. However, most grains and many byproducts have too much energy and no particle size to give the ration some bulk.

By working with their nutritionist, dairy producers can combine feeds such as cottonseed hulls, soybean hulls, whole cottonseed, wheat midds, soybean meal, canola meal, distillers grains and limestone as a short-term substitute for forage, he says. While not all of these alternative feeds will be included in each ration, producers should limit the period of time they feed these higher-risk diets. Producers also should not feed this kind of diet for an extended length of time during dry periods.

If pastures do become available, producers need to remember vegetative grass has little forage (roughage) value, he says. That means they will need to add byproducts, such as grain hulls, to the ration to provide cud-cleansing chewing activity and add bulk to the diet.

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