Sunflower Silage May Be an Option for Drought-stressed Sunflower Crop

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Silage may be an option for portions of this year's sunflower crop stressed by drought conditions in parts of North Dakota and surrounding states, according to Greg Lardy, North Dakota State University Extension Service beef cattle specialist.

Sunflower silage is lower in energy, but higher in crude protein than corn silage. In addition, the moisture content of sunflowers tends to be high, even under drought conditions. Consequently, sunflower silage may need dry feed added in the silage-making process to achieve desirable moisture content in the final silage product.

"As with any silage, ensuring the silage is put up under anaerobic conditions will improve silage quality and the feeding value of the final product," Lardy says. "Producers should pack the silage pile adequately and cover the silage with plastic to eliminate oxygen penetration in the bunker silo."

Sunflower silage made from mature sunflowers tends to be higher in fat than corn silage, alfalfa haylage or other common forage crops. However, sunflower silage made from immature sunflowers likely will contain less fat due to less seed content. South Dakota State University research indicates sunflower silage may not be the best feed for dairy cattle because milk production decreased when the sunflower silage was offered to lactating cows.

Sunflowers occasionally can accumulate nitrate. Producers should test sunflower silages for nitrate levels prior to feeding.

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