

New Forage Realities

By John Dhuyvetter

Winter feeding and care of cattle in the Northern Plains has always been a critical aspect to producing in the environment. It represents the major cost and activity of producers to meet the most basic needs of adequate feed for efficient production and well-being of the stock.

Farming and ranching adaptations to economics, policies, weather, and technology have been seen as trends in feeds, rations, and methods over time. Recently drought, biofuel expansion, high commodity prices, and rapidly rising land values has dramatically raised the costs to producers to buy, or the opportunity market value of feeds. At the same time labor availability and cost has become more limiting and machinery and equipment to harvest and deliver feed has been highly inflationary.

Hay and forage while at times has been historically abundant and inexpensive, is now more scarce and certainly more valuable. Options for low quality low cost hay off managed CRP contracts are disappearing fast and the opportunity to raise a forage crop on high rent land capable of a high profit grain crop becoming an increasingly competitive factor. With forage being the basic feed need for ruminants in wintering stock cows and growing feeders, today's scenario brings forth some new forage realities.

Differing situations are bringing forth unique challenges being addressed in a variety of ways often with some trade-offs. Probably most evident is the opportunity with \$100 per ton hay versus \$50/ton, to enhance yields through management, reduce losses, and minimize needs.

There are a number of possibilities to be reviewed. Old hay stands no longer productive might be renovated. Inclusion of a legume as alfalfa in grass dominated fields can be a boost through greater nitrogen status without the cost of a commercial application. Newer forage species and varieties are likely more productive. More timely cuttings can result in maximizing feed nutrients harvested. Well maintained equipment that minimizes harvest losses and potential weather losses at harvest enhance nutrient yield.

Where available acreage is limited and a high quantity of feed is needed, or high quality forage is beneficial, silage is an option. Cost per nutrient can be favorable in spite of production costs when yield is high. Yield potentials are largely influenced by production basics as hybrid selection, early planting, excellent weed control and good fertility. Harvesting at optimum moisture, packing and covering help reduce potentially high storage loss.

Maximizing the use of low cost roughage with strategic supplementation is a particular good option in corn growing regions. Grazing stover left behind corn harvest reduces the need for hay and can extend grazing further reducing feeding costs. New procedures are now being developed to harvest, grind, and treat residues to enhance their digestibility as a feed. Where fall moisture can be anticipated to germinate a second crop (as a mixture of oats, radish, and turnip after the early harvest of peas or barley), it might as well provide additional fall grazing.

When cash crops fail (hail, disease, poor emergence, etc.) consider opportunities to replant a high yielding annual forage as oats, millet or hybrid sorghum sudan. With attention to fertility and weed control there is the potential for over two tons per acre of a high quality forage. If fencing and water is available it can be grazed or windrowed and left for late grazing, rather than cut, cured, and baled.

Most operations can further conserve hay in proper storage and more careful feeding. Where more than a days feed is fed to smaller groups of cattle, hay waste can be reduced by using bale feeders. Design, durability, and price affect effectiveness and true cost. Consider hay saving designs allowing more room per bale, slanted bars, greater height and a means of suspending the bale off ground.

Bale grazing larger groups with a multiple day supply of bales in the field has the benefit of reducing feeding commitments and leaving the manure dispersed in the fields but, must be carefully managed to minimize waste and maintain cow condition. Including some low quality forage as cereal straw in combination with some moderate and higher quality bales matched to the estimated dry matter consumption of the cattle for a time period limited to three to five days is suggested. A good estimation of cow weight, and bale weights is helpful in the implementation of bale grazing.

Efficient use of forage consumed is also important. Adequate protein in the ration to supply microorganisms with adequate nitrogen is critical to efficient breakdown of fiber and forage utilization. Additionally meeting mineral and vitamins needs is critical and might be addressed through free choice or included in supplements provided. Forage analysis can help determine if and what may be needed and how best to deliver.

Forage, the basic feed for cattle, is more valuable today whether it is standing in the pasture, rolled into a bale, or packed into a bunker. As such it may deserve greater attention in valuing its costs, and maximizing its use and value.