

## Take Control of Your Forage

By: Jay Thurman

June 2014

When formulating rations for a dairy, often the nutritionist will take into account inventory of silages first. Once silage feeding rates are “set” in the ration, the rest of the ingredients float around to best match the nutritional and economic parameters of the dairy. Typically corn silage is the primary driver around which the remainder of the ration is built. Once the feeding rate is determined to match the inventory, the amount of starch contribution from that corn silage is determined. At that point, grain and forage requirements can be estimated and corn grain, hay, small grain silages and other ingredients can be secured. In short, silages and primarily corn silage continue to play a major role in the nutritional, economical and logistical consideration on a majority of dairies. Since this is such a key factor on the dairy, who is the primary determiner of the silage being fed on your dairy?

Some dairymen have an agronomic background, have done their homework and have researched the varieties available from the different seed companies. As well, they know the mineral profile of their farm ground, and are properly equipped to determine the best fits for their ground. Still other dairymen have in their employ someone who fits the aforementioned qualifications and manage the farming responsibilities that way. Honestly however, many dairymen are focused on the actual dairy and the day to day operation and management of the cows. Unfortunately, forage management gets relegated to a few days each year when it is time to determine when to chop and what inoculant to use, who is packing, and how’s the kernel processing going. Too often, out of the dairy owner’s mouth comes something of a give-up. “Okay just do the best you can, the chiller went down in the parlor and I have to go get it going again”.

And so a year’s worth of feed is packed and covered. A large percentage of the feed budget is spent and instead of feeling satisfied about the effort put into the harvest, and pride in the quality of feed we are trying to turn into milk next year, we are frustrated. We are frustrated because the yield wasn’t what we had hoped for, the chopper was a week late, the silage is too dry, kernel processing wasn’t very good, it took two weeks to finally get it covered. Just fill in the blank; it just wasn’t what we hoped for.

Suggestion... Take control.

Plan. Research. Understand the impact nutritionally and economically. Determine the value.

Obviously, it will take planning to not only determine which acres to plant with what, but also to work with the custom farmer to develop a new way to make decisions. Through research, you may determine that the varieties that work best for the dairy might not be what the farmer would have picked. In this scenario, a plan to fairly compensate the farmer may need to be developed in order to supply the dairy with the “right” forage and not punish the farmer. Both sides need to understand there are multiple factors that will determine the “right” forage. Among these are quality, yield, water requirements, growing time, etc...

There are forage consultants, nutrition consultants, seed companies and others that can help determine the best fit for your dairy. Forage quality matters. The characteristics of the starch and fiber produced matters. Don't let the 5% discount from the seed company to the farmer determine what your cows eat for the next year. Take control of your forage, because how you manage it goes Straight to Your Bottom Line!