GRAZING NEWSLETTER

DFA Grazing

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Mike's Paddock

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Recently, the cover of a popular dairy publication showed a loader with a quantity of money in the bucket and an amount falling out onto the ground. The article is actually based on cost-effective rations, but the picture itself immediately made me think about silage losses — more commonly known as shrink. In my travels around the country visiting producers' farms, either through field days or client visits, the amount of shrink tolerated amazes me. We're talking real dollars here.

Early last year, I was privileged to give a presentation on the role of corn silage on grazing dairies in Moultrie, Ga. Many graziers use silage when their grazing pastures have stopped producing. It's also a way to store extra feed when your feed wedge gets out of sync. Part of that presentation was devoted to shrink and ways we can reduce the amount of money — and feed — we lose as part of the ensiling process.

From the time the dairy producer chops and stores his corn crop in the silo, bag, trench or pile, is it fair to assume that chopped crop volume will be available at feeding time? The answer is sadly, no. According to research done in 2011, almost 20 percent of the nation's corn silage crop was lost to spoilage before feeding. The main factors contributing to storage shrink are:

- Crop chopped too wet or dry
- Lack of adequate compaction
- Lack of adequate covering

Though some shrink is inevitable during the fermentation process, single digit figures are easily achieved provided we follow some best practices. No matter how well the crop is ensiled, once the silo, trench, bag or pile is opened for use and the face is exposed to oxygen, yeasts and molds become active again. They convert residual sugars, fermentation acids and other soluble nutrients into carbon dioxide, water and heat.

Feedout losses can represent up to 30 percent of the total dry matter lost in the ensiling process. Let's do some math. If a 26-ton-per-acre crop costs $40 per ton (2013 figures) from planting to covering, every 1 percent loss adds to that figure. If you suffer a 30 percent total dry matter loss (ensiling plus feeding), your cost balloons to $52 per ton. Not only that,

Spring season grazing tips

It won't be long before spring growth in warm and cool season perennial pastures will be ready to graze. Here are some important points to remember:

- Don't wait for the grass to be the optimum height before you start grazing. Start grazing early to avoid having over-mature, low-quality feed. Grazing early will establish a feed wedge much quicker.
- Practice the three Ms — measure, monitor and manage. You can't manage your feed wedge properly if you don't know how much grass you're growing and what your daily pasture growth rates are.
- Aim for a pre-grazing level between 2,800 and 3,000 pounds of dry matter per acre and a post-grazing residual of no more than 1,600 pounds of dry matter per acre.
- Control weeds early. Spraying weeds while they are in the seedling stage uses less chemicals and will not drastically hurt clover.
- Apply 50 units of nitrogen after the first grazing. Following the cows with urea works well. Consider applying RyzUp Smartgrass at this time as well. This product naturally stimulates early growth and works well in conjunction with nitrogen. It is also certified organic.

Remember, good spring management not only sets up pasture production quality for summer and fall, but also puts the dairyman in the best position for maximum production and profitability. To brush up on some grazing best practices, watch our Grazing 101 series, available at www.dfagrazing.com.

Mike's Paddock, cont.

you're 30 percent short of what your feed budget called for.

Generally, the first signs of aerobic deterioration are heat and an off odor, followed by a fungal growth on the surface of the silage and/or in the feedbunk. By the time fungal growth appears, substantial amounts of dry matter and nutrients have already been lost. Don't feed spoiled silage for several reasons: it lacks highly digestible nutrients and some molds can produce mycotoxins that can cause reduced lactation and illness — dry cattle included.

Management of the silage face is the most critical issue when it comes to feeding phase spoilage. Determine how much silage is required for the day's feeding and scrape only that quantity from the silage face vertically. Aim to use the daily requirements from the whole face, and if there is a small amount left, make sure it is fed in the first load the next day to replacement cattle.

Other methods of reducing feed losses include:

- Make sure everything in the loader/bucket makes it to the mixer or wagon
- Ensure adequate bunk space for all animals being fed
- Avoid feeding corn silage/pTMR on the ground

The bullet points above not only relate to corn silate. Correct moisture level, compaction and correct covering (oxygen barrier, heavy plastic cover and tires) apply to all ensiled forages. Remember, there is a very fine line between quality silage and compost.

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