

New spectro-computer can save \$60 on dairy feed bills

BY JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

BAIR — Now that we have it, where should we go with it?

In a nutshell, that's the question John Shenk, Penn State ag researcher, posed to forage producers after demonstrating a promising management tool at the February 3 York forage seminar.

That tool is the mobile infrared spectro computer, a complete and compact feed analysis lab installed in a van. Equipped with computer terminal, infrared light scanner, a weighing system and microwave oven for drying wet materials, the unit can read and print out an analysis of feed materials in less than two minutes.

Development of the forage analysis computer took five years to study and experimentation and cost a half-million dollars. Shenk estimates it would take \$75,000 to put a comparably-equipped van operator on the road full time, serving a group of farmers who would subscribe to the analysis service on a regular, perhaps monthly, basis.

"The average dairyman could increase profits \$60 to \$80 per cow with ready access to this machine," figures Shenk. A \$20 to \$30 charge per cow per year would seem a reasonable amount for the service.

Calculating a step further, Shenk says it would take a sign-up representing 2500 cows to make the van operation a profitable venture. With average family-size herds of 57 cows, one van would have to do feed analyses for only 44 herds to operate in the black.



"That's all it is, just a farm management tool," says John Shenk of the infrared spectro computer, introduced to York forage growers during the county hay clinic.

With an estimated half-million dairy cows in Pennsylvania, there's potential to keep numerous computers blinking away at silages, hay and grain materials.

Shenk admits the feeders already doing a top-notch job will not be the operators to benefit the most from the space-age service. They're already doing an obviously good job of feed ration balancing.

Those operations that would stand to gain the most from a regular analysis service are the large-number herds, where feed is used in large tonnages and forages

can change rapidly in nutrient value.

Value of the program depends solely on the accuracy of the feed samples. For a true picture of the complete feeding program, all feeds must be tested, since the protein, fiber and TDN in silages must be balanced with that from grains and hay products.

Among the approximately 80 forage producers who came from as far away as Maryland for feed analysis, the computer evoked interest, praise and little doubt that the service will become an accepted part of future feeding programs.

How soon, and just who will offer the service, remain the only real questions surrounding the establishment of regular analysis routes.

Some growers were delighted with their computerized forage report cards, while others scratched their heads over the results.

Frank Wilnot, Summit Hill Turf Farm in Gaithersburg, Maryland, came up with a 22 percent protein analysis on a mostly alfalfa with some bluegrass hay made in rotation with the farm's turf cropping.

"Food's an energy source and we can't afford to be as wasteful with it as we've been in the past," Wilnot mused after the meeting. He sees the computer as having tremendous potential toward that purpose.

"I think it's neat!" was the



Forage growers clustered around Penn State ag researcher John Shenk and his infrared spectro computer as the mobile lab sampled and analyzed various forage products.

reaction of Faith Peterson, who'd brought a sample of the forage for the family's cow-calf operation at New Oxford.

And another dairyman planned to go home and push a pencil, after the computer told him to stop feeding the high-moisture corn stored in his silos and start adding 40 percent supplement to his dairy ration, for recommended levels of

protein.

The researchers are now drawing up guidelines for a pilot program to take the van on the road to the feedlots of the state's dairy and livestock operators. Funding of the continued program seems to be the only real roadblock that remains to infrared spectro computer's revolutionizing farm feeding.



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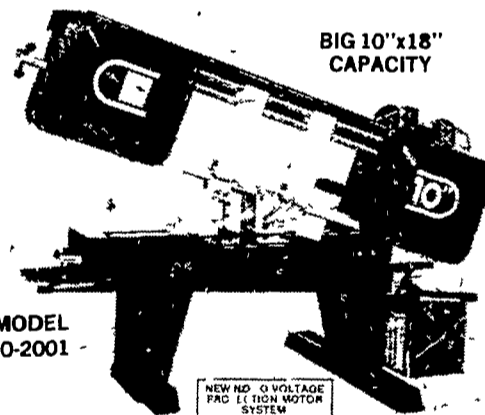
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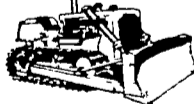


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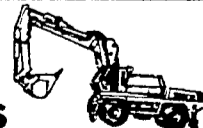
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