

Alfalfa-fed heifers outgain those on grass

BELTSVILLE, Md. — When Holstein heifers were fed diets of either orchardgrass or alfalfa preserved as direct-cut silage with a formic acid-formaldehyde treatment, U.S. Department of Agriculture scientists found that the heifers fed alfalfa gained considerably more weight.

Keith Goerling, a scientist with USDA's Science and Education Administration, presented his research on the contrasting diets

at the Large Dairy Herd Management Conference held recently in Vermont.

Alfalfa, as a legume, has a different chemical make-up than orchardgrass, including a higher percentage of protein.

USDA scientists harvested two cuttings of alfalfa and orchardgrass containing similar amounts of digestible energy. Then for a 119-day period, yearling Holstein heifers were fed solely

alfalfa or orchardgrass silage.

During the four-month test, heifers given the alfalfa diet gained an average of 992 grams (2.19 pounds) per day, while those on the orchardgrass diet gained only 662 grams (1.46 pounds) per day.

"In two tests over the past four years, we have obtained similar results," says Goerling, who works in the Ruminant Nutrition Laboratory of the Beltsville

Agricultural Research Center in Beltsville, Md.

Blood analysis during the test period showed higher levels of essential amino acids in alfalfa-fed heifers compared to those fed orchardgrass diets. The larger weight gain of heifers fed alfalfa appears to be related to higher dry matter intake.

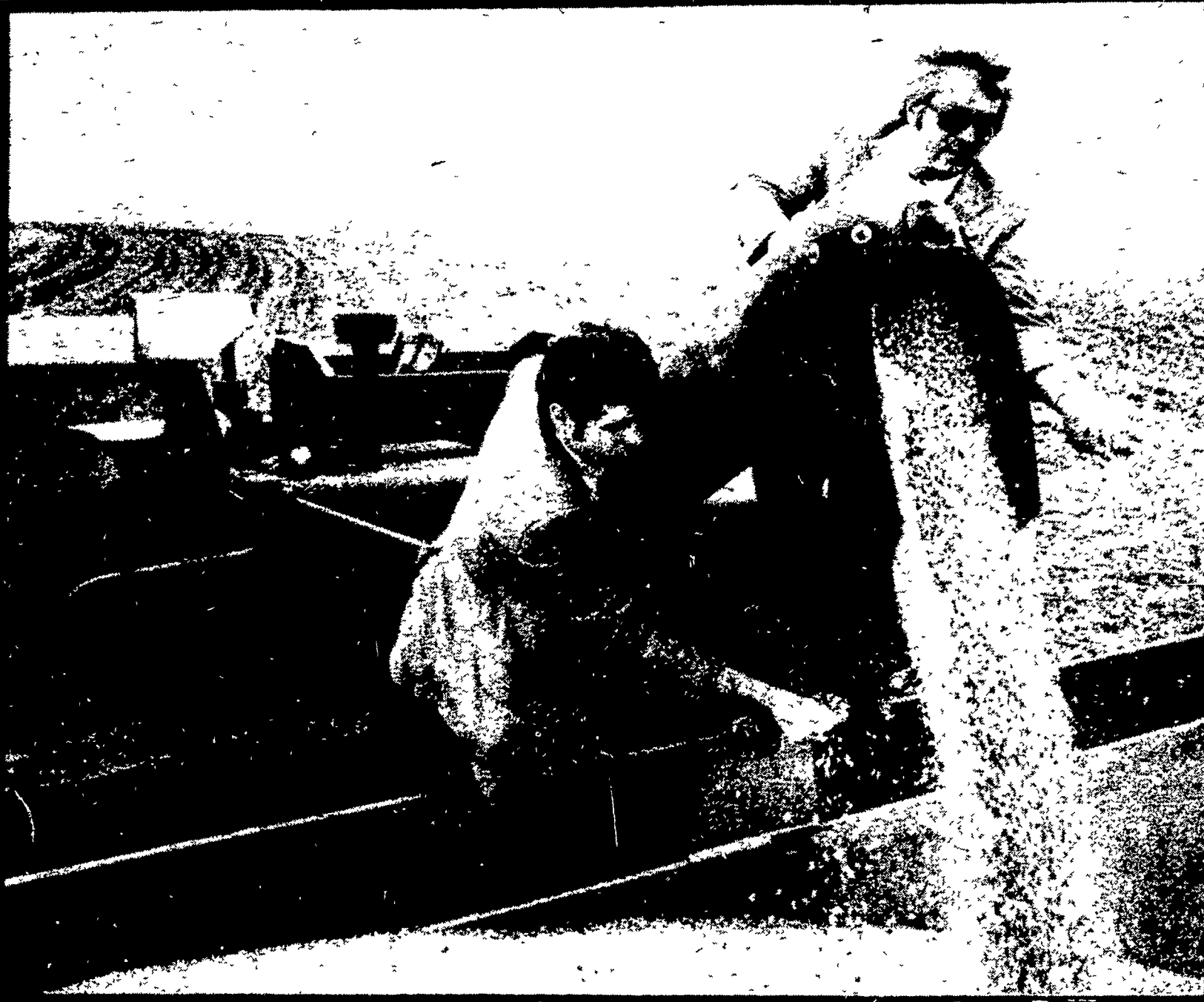
Also, alfalfa contains less fiber and more soluble nutrients than orchardgrass.

By treating harvested forage with the formic acid-formaldehyde preservative, SEA scientists were able to harvest the alfalfa and orchardgrass when the forages had similar levels of digestible energy.

This allowed the researchers to contrast the effect that each forage had on the heifers' weight gain. This treatment also allowed direct storage of alfalfa after harvest.



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