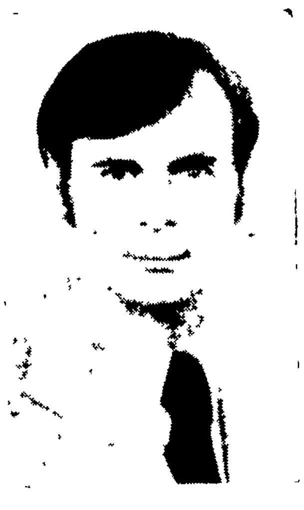

Dairy Pipeline

By
Glenn A. Shirk

Extension
Dairy
Agent

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Extension Agent - Dairy

GOOD QUALITY FREE PROFIT

Most people would jump at a chance to make some "free profit". The opportunity to make free profit sounds almost too good to be true, but it just might be possible.

Good quality forage is one of the keys to good production and higher profits. Quality in homegrown forages is one thing that can be obtained free with the right kind of management. However, if you have to purchase quality in feeds, it can be very expensive. The time to focus on quality is right now, at the start of the forage harvesting season. The single most important factor affecting quality is stage of maturity of the forage at time of harvest. The older the forage the lower the quality, and it can drop rather quickly as crops come into bloom or as heads start to emerge.

Alfalfa generally should be cut in the bud stage; weak stands and new seedings should be cut around the mid bud stage, to avoid putting additional stress on plants. Grasses should be cut in the late boot to early head stage. This usually poses a problem with spring harvests. The weather may not be cooperating when the crop is ready to be harvested - or, there may be corn to plant.

Weather damage is another factor affecting quality. We can't control the weather, but we can keep abreast of projected weather maps and weather forecasts so we can work more effectively with the weather. Cut hay at the beginning of the first good break in the weather, even though the crop may be a little younger than what you anticipated, and even though you still have corn to plant. It may be the only break in the weather that you'll get for the spring harvest!

Remember, it takes more good days of weather to make hay than it does to plant corn. True, the slight delay in corn planting will probably reduce corn yields - slightly, and the earlier cutting may reduce hay yields, especially for the first cutting, but the quality you gain should more than offset these losses. Remember, the quality you get is the quality you'll be feeding for a long time. The quality you don't get could be expensive to purchase, or the production lost as a result of poor quality can be expensive.

Taking the first cutting off early also increases the possibility of getting an extra cutting or two for the season, helping to compensate for the smaller first cutting. If the weather, or some other circumstance, forces you to harvest the crop prematurely at a young stage of maturity, allow the next cutting to come into bloom or to start shooting new growth from basal buds.

Chemical Conditioners, Bags, Preservatives

If weather fails to cooperate, you have a few tools to help you through the harvest season, but you'll have to weigh the costs against the benefits. Consider harvesting the crop as haylage. If necessary, store it in a bag or on a stack if silos are unavailable. Or you can bale it wet. When bagging bales, it is important to protect the bags from punctures, to make a tight bale, and to bale it wet - at the same moisture levels recommended for ensiling. Hay too wet to bale and too dry to ensile, is also too dry to bag; chances are, it will spoil.

With the aid of a variety of preservatives, hay can be baled earlier at higher levels of moisture, before the arrival of that threatening storm or before the leaves have a chance to shatter.

Chemical conditioners are the latest thing coming to our aid. The chemical is applied (sprayed) on the stalk of the standing crop as it is being cut. These chemicals (sodium carbonate, potassium carbonate, etc.) can cut drying time by about one day. They are generally more effective with legumes than with grasses, and their benefits are enhanced when used in conjunction with mechanical conditioners (crimpers, rollers, etc.).

Length of Cut

Remember, we are feeding our hay crop to ruminants, and they need a certain minimum amount of effective fiber to maintain normal digestion, normal health, normal production and normal fat test. You can destroy the effectiveness of the fiber in the forage by chopping it too fine. Remember, too, it's the length of cut which the cow consumes which is really important. Consider how much more the forage is chewed up as it leaves the silo, as it is being mixed, and as it is being conveyed to the bunk; its consistency may change considerably from the time it was chopped until it is consumed.

Experts suggest that about one fourth of all the forage particles a cow consumes in her total ration should be 1.5 inches in length, or longer. To attain this, it might be necessary to adjust the cutter knives for a 5/16 to 3/8 inch theoretical length of cut. This is only a guideline. Generally, as the amount of chopped feeds, ensiled feeds, and grain in a cow's ration is increased, and as the amount of moisture in the total ration goes up, level of forage feeding goes down, the more important it is to have a coarser cut.

Accessibility

Quality doesn't do you much good if you can't get to the good quality feed to be able to feed it to the good producers - the mortgage lifters - that need it. Conversely, when you do get to it, it's foolish to waste high quality feed on cows and heifers that don't need it!

What I'm leading up to is plan your forage storage so you can access whatever kind and quality of feed you want for any cows at any time. This enables you to put your forage to its best use. These opportunities don't exist on all farms; nevertheless, it is still a good idea worthy of your consideration. It might mean more smaller-sized silos as opposed to one big silo. Or consider stacks, bags, etc. Maybe you can stack your hay differently in the mow.

Give some thought to these ideas this season. Many of these thoughts reqtire no capital outlay - just good management; they may be your few free tickets to improved profits.

For more information on this subject, contact the Penn State Extension Service which is an affirmative action, equal opportunity educational service.

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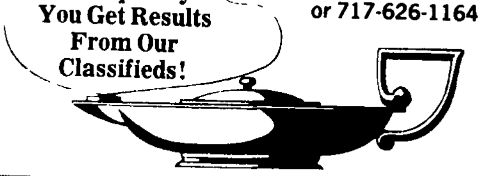

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