

How to cope with low-quality forage on your dairy

Last spring, Mother Nature dealt a challenging hand to many area dairy producers. First crop hay was cut late in many cases, and much of the hay was rained on after it was cut. Coping with low-quality forage is a major challenge facing many dairy producers in Wisconsin. Producers should consider the following recommendations when feeding low-quality haylage:

- Test first-crop forage to assess its crude protein, bypass protein, and energy content. A forage test developed by the University of Wisconsin to assess the bypass protein content of legume forages is available. Check with your forage lab for details. Forage protein content and degradability and energy content decline as forages mature.
- Based on forage test results, adjust the level and source of protein supplementation in the diet.
- Based on forage test results, increase the amount of grain fed to adjust ration fiber and energy as needed. Add a buffer to the ration when feeding higher levels of grain. Consider feeding yeast culture.
- Dilute low-quality haylage with corn silage. You may need to adjust your corn silage inventory plans this fall to accommodate this feeding strategy through the winter months. Be sure to adjust grain levels as the amount of corn silage increases in the diet.
- Consider replacing low-quality haylage with 4-6 lbs. of whole cottonseed per cow per day.
- Dilute low-quality haylage with higher quality haylage as it becomes available.
- Target poor quality forages to low producing cows, dry cows, and replacement heifers.
- Fine grind corn to increase energy availability.
- If body condition is a problem, increase supplemental fat in the ration when possible.
- Evaluate mold and mycotoxin levels and dilute, discard or redirect affected forages as needed. This is especially true of forage that was rained on and laid in the field for an extended period of time. Many of these windrows showed significant levels of spoilage prior to harvest.

Unlike the recent past, commodity grain and protein prices are higher than average. Nonetheless, these ration adjustments must be made based on forage quality. It's more critical than ever to harvest future alfalfa cuttings at the optimum time. Finally, plan to harvest corn silage at the appropriate maturity and moisture to ensure the best quality forage possible. If you have questions regarding forage quality, call the Polk County UW-Extension Office at 485-8600.