

With the extreme drought, dairymen are facing, I wanted to focus this issue of the roundtable on areas that may be able to help.

1. What should dairymen do about the nitrate level in their feed? Do they need to be concerned?

TEST! Most forage tested this summer, using a qualitative test, has indicated the presence of high levels of nitrates. However, a summary of over 100 Missouri corn silage samples submitted to a northern laboratory has not indicated any problems. Fortunately, when high nitrate feed is allowed to ensile we typically see a loss of 30-50% of the nitrates. But, to be on the safe side all of our problem forages should have a quantitative test for nitrates. The \$8-10 cost is low compared to the loss of a calf or death.

2. Is Alfa toxin a problem this year? What can be done about it?

Yes. Reports have come in of over 100 ppb in corn grain, where 20 ppb is the acceptable level. All corn purchased or raised should be tested. The toxicology laboratory at the University of Missouri has only had two corn silage samples submitted for analysis at the time of this writing, and even though both proved negative, they anticipate many positive results, so silage should also be tested. Similar to the grain analysis, proper sampling technique is critical for reliable results. If aflatoxin is present the only answer is purchase clean feed or dilution in the diet.

3. What types of alternative feeds are available that dairymen should be considering?

There are many types available, but perhaps the question should be “which ones fit the needs of your feeding program?” The following link allows you to compare the relative value of various feeds that might be considered, <http://agebb.missouri.edu/dairy/byprod/energygain.asp>. However, if your forages are low quality, selecting an alternative feed based strictly on its price or feed value might not be prudent, when what you need is a feed higher in starch. It is critical that you work with your consultant or feed company to develop a ration that meets the requirements of the animals, even though it might be a bit higher priced.

4. Is it economically wise to sacrifice milk production for low quality/low cost forages and feedstuffs?

“You can pay me now, or you can pay me later” certainly pertains to the current situation. Energy intake is almost always the most limiting factor for production. If one takes draconian measures that significantly lowers energy intake, you will pay for it in loss of production, reproduction and body weight. Not only will it affect the current lactation, but the next one as well. Try to feed a minimum of 10-15 pounds of high quality alfalfa and use as good a grass forage you can. Add fat or whole cottonseed to increase the energy density to counteract the lower quality forages. Fat has 2.25 times the energy of carbohydrate or protein.

5. With the prolonged heat, drought and low quality feed, what kind of impact will they have on reproduction? What can the dairyman do to try and improve the situation?

According to Dr. Scott Poock, MU Ext. Vet., the heat, drought and low quality feed its going to impact reproduction in a number of ways. Producers will see a decrease in conception rates, more open cows, more Early Embryonic Deaths (EED) and abortions. Cows may transition fine, but lower energy will delay cyclicity, thus decreasing conception rates and increasing days open. Producers should seriously consider an estrus synchronization program with some type of early pregnancy check and a resynch program. Certainly, nutrition of the transition cow and feeding through until the cows are pregnant will be vital.

6. With Hurricane Isaac potentially bringing needed rain, it is too late to plant fall forages? What can dairymen do to try and increase their fall/winter feedstuffs?

Winter annuals are a viable alternative producers should consider. Typically they should be planted by the first to mid-September in Missouri. Plantings after October 1 may not result in much growth, although a mild winter would be very beneficial. Estimated fall dry matter yields for popular annuals would be: cereal rye, 1.5T/A; oats, 2T/A; wheat, 1T/A; and turnips, 3T/A.

7. What should the government be doing to help?

Joe Horner, MU Ag. Economist recently suggested: emergency feed loans, emergency cost share on forage purchases for this winter, low interest loans and cost share on forage storage similar to that on grain storage structures and add cull cows to the USDA purchases to hold up cull cow values this fall.

8. If the drought continues to next year, what should dairymen be doing to prepare?

Become more efficient is the pat answer most would give, but what dairy has not already implemented those measures due to past economic conditions? When was the last time you revisited your business plan? What are your objectives? Is it to sell breeding stock, milk or a combination? Are you overstocked for the capability of your farm to support a major portion of your feedstuffs during conditions we have experienced or do you have a contingency plan for acquiring additional feed. Consider making arrangements with a neighbor for corn you will purchase for silage, based on a price mutually agreed on before planting season. Feed is the major cost of production and is the factor needing serious consideration for next year.

9. Looking into your crystal ball, what will the next 12 months bring for the dairy industry?

Much better milk prices. Dairy cow numbers will be declining, we have been pulling heifers into beef feedlots for 9 months already and low energy forages will reduce production. Producers can expect \$22-25 per cwt for the next 12 months.