Beef producers face forage shortage

Beef producers have faced an unusual situation this year in feeding their animals — a shortage of forage. Cattle are ruminants, thus, their diet can be supplemented with grain (corn), but they need forage for the proper functioning of their stomachs and good animal health. Cattle can be raised only on forage (grass fed), but not totally on grain.

Weather events have created the forage shortage. Most alfalfa stands did not survive the winter because of wet conditions and periods of extreme cold. Wet field conditions this spring also prevented farmers from planting new forage crops.

In addition, wet conditions the past two months prevented the harvest of hayfields that survived the winter. Most of these fields were harvested and baled during the last week of June. This “first cutting” generally occurs in mid-May and the second cutting would be harvested the end of June or early July.

As a result of these unfortunate events, beef producers are scrambling to find quality forage to feed their animals the rest of the year. They are looking at summer annual forages that can be planted now to get them through this tough time.

Which forage species a producer selects will depend on equipment accessibility, storage facilities, and market end use. Producers will have to determine whether their operations can manage silage, haylage, and/or hay.

The difference among these systems is the percent of moisture at harvest and storage.

For instance, silage and haylage can be stored at higher moisture content but will rely on fermentation and some type of storage apparatus to prevent spoilage, such as a silo for silage and wrap for haylage. While almost any forage can be ensiled, only a few can be easily dried to a safe moisture range for hay.

Some of these emergency seedings will use forage species unfamiliar to many of us, such as teff, millet, triticale, and Italian ryegrass.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has changed cover crop rules because of the forage shortage, so species used for summer cover crops may become an emergency forage such as clover.

Historically, government regulations would not allow a beef producer to harvest forage from cover crops until after Nov. 1. However, with the large number of corn and soybean acres that were not planted, and the forage shortage, the government will allow a harvest of cover crop forage after Sept. 1.

Dr. Mark Sules, Ohio State University Extension state forage specialist, and Dr. Bill Weiss, OSU Extension state dairy nutritionist, have developed a list of options that a beef producer may use for planting summer emergency forages. These options include:

- Corn plant silage — the highest potential for yield, but quality will be lower with late plantings. Correct moisture at harvest is critical for ensiling quality.
- Forage sorghum, sorghum-sudangrass crosses, and sudangrass — Brown midrib (BMR) varieties are best for lactating cows. Conventional varieties are: OK if BMR seed is unavailable.
- Winter triticale varieties are genotypes developed by traditional breeding methods for low lignin content, a cell wall material that lowers forage digestibility. These genotypes are called brown midrib because their leaf midrib and stalk pith have a reddish-brown color.
- Oat or spring triticale silage or haylage — easier than corn silage but lower in yield. It can be mowed and allowed to wilt to correct harvest moisture.
- Spring triticale is commonly planted as a hay or haylage crop and can produce high levels of dry matter under challenging conditions. It is later maturing than oats or barley and will maintain its forage quality for an extended harvest window.

Triticale is a genetic cross by conventional breeding methods of wheat and rye. Its name is derived from the wheat genus name, Triticum, and the rye genus name, Secale.

- Oat and winter rye mixed silage — slightly higher silage yield advantage compared to oats alone. Also, the rye component can provide spring silage or haylage.

- Italian ryegrass silage — small fall harvest with three cuttings next year starting in April. It also can be cut as haylage. If allowed to go to seed, it can be a weed problem in future small grain fields.
- Soybean silage — a good replacement for lost alfalfa fields. Some pesticide labels will not allow treated or sprayed soybeans to be used for forage.
- Tef — a warm-season annual grass best suited for sheep and beef. It has lower yield than sorghum grasses despite multiple harvests being possible.
- Millets — a major grain crop worldwide and best suited for beef and sheep. In most situations, it will only produce a single harvest.

Beef producers may be trying some of these options to replace forages lost this spring. Beef production has been used for discussion purposes in this article. However, the sheep and horse industry has also been affected by the forage shortage.

Additional information may be found at https://agcrops.osu.edu/newsletter/corn-newsletter/2019/2019-challenges-forage-production-options-ohio

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