Texas Dairy Matters

Higher Education Supporting the Industry

FORAGE EVALUATION AND FEEDING UNDER DROUGHT CONDITIONS

Tamilee D. Nennich, Ph.D.
Extension Dairy Specialist
Department of Animal Science
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
The Texas A&M University System

Forages are the base of a dairy ration. The quality of the forages fed to dairy animals affects their health and production levels. Drought conditions create numerous problems with forages on a dairy operation, including reduced yields and lower forage quality.

Reduced forage yields are expected during drought conditions when irrigation is not available. Yield reductions occur due to reduced water availability to move nutrients into and through the plant. If the yield reductions caused by this year's drought leave your dairy operation short of forage for the year, search for alternatives immediately. Several options available include:

- Purchase extra forage from other producers or locations.
- Increase the content of purchased forages in the ration.
- Add other fiber sources to the ration (such as soy hulls, wheat midds, cottonseed, etc.).

Planning ahead to account for forage shortages provides more feed options, as well as more flexibility in the purchase price of feedstuffs.

In many cases, producers focus on yield reductions during a drought year. However, the quality of the crop is even more important when evaluating forage supplies. Just because there is a crop to harvest in a drought year does not mean that the quality is similar to that found during good growing seasons. Sometimes, the cost of feeding poor quality forages can be even greater than

purchasing high quality forage. If the poor quality forage causes a reduction in milk production and results in poor animal health or even deaths, the cost of feeding the forage adds up significantly.

To know the quality of forage, collect samples and run analyses on the forage. Test the forages as soon as possible. Waiting to test until a day or two before starting to feed a forage is too late. If you wait, the number of alternative options decreases if forage quality is poor. For example, test corn silage as it goes into the bunker to predict the actual quality of the silage. Although some minor changes in nutritive values may occur and the quality of fermentation affects the feed value of the silage, sampling the forage before it is ensiled indicates the overall quality of the crop. Although the pre-ensiling sample can be used as a management tool, it should not take the place of periodic forage tests during the feedout period.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service provides equal opportunities in its programs and employment to all persons, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating