Texas Dairy Matters
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Green Chop for Lactating Cow Rations in Texas

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Green chopping potentially decreases feed costs through the incorporation of locally grown forages into the dairy ration. It provides a highly palatable, fresh forage source to dairy cattle. The high palatability stimulates feed intake of lactating cows, potentially increasing milk production. Due to the high palatability, green chop minimizes declines in intake associated with heat stress.

Successful green chop programs must utilize a variety of forage species to be able to supply fresh forage throughout the entire year. In Texas, warm-season grasses, such as coastal bermudagrass, Tifton 85, and sorghum/sudangrass, are good options throughout the summer months, especially when a good water source is available. The inclusion of small grains into the cropping plan provides fresh forage during the winter months. There are many varieties of small grains available for use as forage sources, such as wheat, oats, triticale, rye, ryegrass, and barley.

Numerous hybrids within each variety provide opportunities to stagger harvest dates throughout the growing season.

Consider the various reasons for including green chop as a management practice on a dairy operation. Advantages of including green chop in a dairy ration include:

1. Palatability of green chop increases daily feed intake.
2. High quality green chop replaces high-cost feeds in the ration.

3. The Texas climate allows for green chopping more months of the year than in other locations.
4. Green chopping decreases forage losses compared to grazing, haying, or harvesting for silage.
5. Intensively managed forage removes more nutrients from the soil and improves the nutrient balance on dairy operations. On the other hand, green chop is not a good option for all dairy operations. There are many factors to consider when determining if a new management practice is the right one for any dairy operation. Keep in mind these requirements when deciding if green chopping is the right choice for a dairy operation. Green chopping requires:

    - A daily commitment to monitor and harvest forages,
    - Daily ration adjustments for green chop moisture levels,
    - Designated equipment to harvest and transport the forage on a daily basis,
    - Continuous monitoring of forage quality to insure cows receive a high quality product,
    - Harvesting on a daily basis because of limited storage capabilities, and
    - A backup plan for when weather or forage growth prevents daily green chopping.

Remember green chopping requires a commitment to intensively manage forages in addition to managing dairy animals. Insuring that the quality of the green chop meets the requirements of lactating cows requires precise agronomic practices. Proper fertilization and irrigation management are essential to support the best potential crop growth and nutrient uptake. Ultimately, the timing of harvest determines the quality of the forage fed to the cows.

Green chopping allows dairy producers to make the most of their land by harvesting fresh high-quality forages for their dairy cows. Since forages are the base of a dairy ration, managing forage quality provides an opportunity to improve the ration and the economic returns for the dairy operation.