

Add Grass To High-Forage Dairy Diets

It helps keep cows healthy, experts say

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Dairy rations consisting of 55-75% forage can help solve a few cow-health problems, says Charlie Sniffen, an independent nutritionist and consultant. They can provide the all-important effective fiber that will help minimize digestive disorders and lameness, agrees Randy Shaver, University of Wisconsin dairy scientist.

But adding grasses to those high-forage diets may clear up even more troubles, says Sniffen, of Fencrest, Holderness, NH.

He usually sees two types of dairy producers who could be helped by adding more forage to their rations. One kind has expanded to where he can no longer produce enough hay or silage on his land, so he buys it from others, causing a nutrient imbalance by not being able to recycle phosphorus and other nutrients.

The second sort of producer has a high-quality corn silage-alfalfa ration that needs additional effective fiber to cool the ration – and he decides to buy straw.

Adding grass could help both types.

In the case of the first producer, Sniffen isn't against expansion – he just believes that expansion should have included more home-grown forages as part of its plan.

“There's a mentality that forages are a pain in the neck,” he says. Yet it takes work to find a grower who can provide a product with consistent quality.

By growing grasses, producers can maintain more control over quality. Those grasses could then be added to the forage quotient or take the place of some of the corn silage or alfalfa in the ration. And it's easier to balance nutrients that can be taken up by plants, fed to cows and recycled back to the soil.

Grasses can also replace straw and provide additional effective fiber in high-energy, high-forage rations, Sniffen says.

“Straw is not ‘real’ forage. We’ve been feeding dry cows on alfalfa and corn silage because that’s all we have on the farm, and the cows freshen and become sick. They DA (suffer from displaced abomasums), you name it. We solve that problem by **feeding them a lot of straw and give them ‘effective fiber.’ Now, if that isn’t nuts, I don’t know what is.”**

He admits that producers buy straw because it’s a more consistent product than purchased grass could be. “It’s a good practice if that’s all you’ve got. But I keep urging them, ‘You really should put some grass in your program.’ ”

Not every dairy can accommodate grasses, yet some soils used to grow alfalfa may lend themselves more to grasses, Sniffen suggests.

To decide how much grass is needed in a high-forage program, he suggests that producers look at what each production group – replacement heifers, dry cows and lactating cows – requires each year and estimate the tonnage.

With some research, even plot studies, growers can determine which grasses, legumes and hybrids work for them. (For information on growing grasses, see page 14.)

High-forage diets in general, he warns, are only as successful as a producer’s storage and feed-out methods.

“You can have the best forages in the world chemically going onto the farm – **until you look at the silo management.** They’re not covering silos; their face management is horrible. They have not been careful and you can see mold lines.” (For silage packing tips, see page 32.)

Sniffen advises producers to sample forage as it goes into storage by load or loads representing a field or area, composite the samples and do an NIR analysis on that composite. Identify where in the silo this composite analysis represents and record it.

With a bunker, when feeding, shave its entire face, from top to bottom, to minimize day-to-day variance. To best sample forages taken out, take a typical amount for the day off the face, put it in a mixer wagon and run it for a minute. Then run a sample to be sent to a lab.

Computed feeding programs may set 55% maxes on feeding forage, Sniffen warns. But more **growers are feeding 60, 65 and even 75% forage successfully**, he and dairy scientist Shaver say.

“Herds in New York are pushing 60-65% forage and really doing quite well,” Shaver says. “They’ve got some pretty exceptional forage, and they’ve also been willing to feed a bit more forage than the computer calls for.

“You’ll want to keep everything balanced for protein and energy, but as you cut back a little on grain, just monitor pretty closely what happens in terms of milk yield and milk protein percent. If you think cows aren’t doing well on those parameters, maybe add back in some grain and see how they respond,” he adds.

Sniffen estimates that it’s safe to add 4-7 lbs of grass silage, on a dry matter basis, to a corn silage-alfalfa ration program. **“Grasses have such high digestibilities and yet such effectiveness in the rumen compared to corn silage or alfalfa haylage.”**