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Will forage quality support more milk production?

Milk production per cow has risen by about 10% in the past decade to just over 24,000 pounds. In the past year, daily production dipped by about 1 pound per cow, but this is probably a "one off," and future production growth is likely.

This growth will require the availability of highly digestible forages that permit greater dry matter intake. Past and current attempts at improving forage quality have included planting brown midrib (BMR) corn and summer annuals, corn hybrids with a higher grain-to-stalk ratio, and more intensive alfalfa harvest management.

Gains from management

How much forage quality gain can we make using these methods? Data is limited, but it appears that while the newer BMR corn hybrids may be higher yielding with improved plant health, they probably have similar neutral detergent fiber (NDF) digestibility as the BMR hybrids they're replacing. Further upticks in the grain-to-stalk ratio of standard corn hybrids will probably be small. There may be new types of hybrids developed with superior fiber digestibility, but current university corn hybrid trials suggest that (with the notable exception of BMR) most standard hybrids fall within a fairly narrow range for NDF digestibility.

Prior to the marketing of HarvXtra alfalfa varieties (more on this to follow), most gains in alfalfa quality were the result of more intensive harvest management. No longer is harvesting standard alfalfa varieties at the late bud stage. An advantage of second-cut HarvXtra alfalfa at the late bud stage is that if rain doesn't have enough time between harvests to recover root carbohydrates.

Managing fall-planted cereals (primarily rye or triticale) as a spring-harvested silage crop, also called “winter forage,” is becoming more common. When planted on the same date, newer triticale varieties appear to mature at about the same time as winter rye. Silage made from either of these species can produce good yields of highly digestible forage, but they must be managed properly, which includes timely planting, fall nitrogen application, and harvest at the flag leaf stage.

For some of the previously cited reasons, the availability of HarvXtra alfalfa varieties, sold by a number of national and regional seed companies, appears to come at an opportune time. Farmers may have approached the biological and practical limits of improving forage quality by more intensively managing standard alfalfa varieties. However, the proper management of HarvXtra alfalfa makes it possible to harvest high-quality alfalfa while maintaining adequate root carbohydrate reserves. Just as BMR corn hybrids have lower levels of lignin, HarvXtra is essentially reduced-lignin alfalfa.

Farmers are offered two choices when managing these reduced-lignin alfalfa varieties: They can mow at the late bud stage and harvest low lignin, highly digestible alfalfa, or they can delay harvest by seven to 10 days (until early bloom) and have forage comparable to that of standard alfalfa varieties mowed at the bud stage.

However, managing HarvXtra traited alfalfa has often been presented as a binary choice: either harvest at the bud stage or harvest at early bloom. But in much of the U.S., alfalfa is harvested at least three times per season, often four or more times. There’s no reason why a farmer can’t harvest the first cutting of HarvXtra-traited alfalfa at the bud stage, then delay the harvest of second and/or later cuts by anywhere from several days until early bloom.

My preference would be to harvest second-cut HarvXtra alfalfa at the bud stage because at comparable stages of maturity the stem quality of second cutting is usually the lowest of all cuttings. An advantage of planning to mow HarvXtra alfalfa at the late bud stage is that if rain or equipment problems occur, the farmer has a seven- to 10-day harvest window and will still be able to harvest “dairy quality” forage.

Thomas is retired from the William H. Miner Agricultural Research Institute and president of Oak Point Agrometrics Ltd.