

FORAGE QUALITY IMPACTS DAIRY FARM PROFITABILITY

Paul E. Jones, D.V.M.
P.O. Box 1758
Enterprise, Alabama 36331

The impact of forage quality on animal performance has a direct effect on dairy farm profitability. Many herd health issues such as laminitis, excess loss of body condition, acidosis, and mycotoxicosis can often be directly related to poor forage quality. The ability to produce high quality forage in the Southeastern USA can be affected by excess rainfall during harvest, drought conditions during the growing season, and excessive plant lignification due to heat and humidity.

Problems associated with forage quality many times result from poor management of the forage after harvesting. Mycotoxicosis, clostridial bacteria, and yeast result from poor harvest and storage techniques. Failure to pack and store the silage will result in forage that can reduce animal productivity and farm profitability. Silo management is critical to the production of high quality forage.

A lack of a forage budget can result in excess off farm feed being purchased. The goal of the forage program is to improve animal health, reduce feed costs, and increase net farm income. A profitable forage program should allow for higher levels of forage intake. I strive to have my clients feed in excess of 18-20 pounds of dry matter forage. In order to feed this amount of forage, fiber levels must be conducive to higher levels of intake. The use of cool season grasses that contain three carbon sugars are more conducive to higher dry matter intakes than tropical grasses that are composed of four carbon sugars.

Forages should be economical to produce. Ryegrass grown and harvested for green chop has shown to be one of the more profitable forages to produce. Ryegrass fed as a green chop can be fed at rates approaching 24-25 lbs. dry matter intake. This forage typically contains in excess of 25% protein, very digestible fiber, and high levels of water soluble sugars. During a 180 growing season for rye grass, the following costs were calculated for a north Florida dairy farm:

• Seed	\$20/acre	Fertilizer	\$209/acre
• Harvesting	\$50/acre	Weed Control	\$20/acre
• Planting	\$20/acre		
Total	\$319/acre	Yield:	5.77 ton dry matter

Cost per ton dry matter \$55.00

The use of high quality forages can be profitable for Southeastern dairy farms. Developing a forage program that is suitable to the geographical location of the dairy farm, available capital resources, and the dietary needs of the dairy animals is needed in the Southeast to insure future profitability of our dairy industry.