

# Feeding Snowballs this Winter? .... Managing a short forage inventory

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Through June and July much of Wisconsin experienced a flash drought. Soil moisture went rapidly from adequate to dry. By August, it was clear many areas were unable to catch up. Depending on where the summer storms popped up, there were winners and losers. Soil type helped some, but if there is no rain at all, there isn't a soil heavy enough to compensate for that.

Forage production has been cut statewide, some were lucky and spotty rain and relatively cool nights allowed for corn development. Even where the corn pulled through much less haylage was made across all cuttings. Pastures have needed to be supplemented or cattle sold off because of the shortage. Since corn silage is an end-of-season crop, many producers can harvest corn that was intended for grain to compensate for a shortage of hay crops. That is an excellent strategy, one of the best in fact. Let's consider how bad the problem can still be:

- Some dairies routinely harvest all of their corn for silage, there are no flex acres to divert from grain.
- If haylage is short and the corn silage yield is way down due to drought stress, it will take many more acres of corn to fill the bunker, accounting for the lower yield in both hay and corn silage.

On the plus side:

- Inventories were adequate going in to 2023
- Due to dry weather, most crops were planted in a timely manner
- Forage quality has been good.

What to do?

- If you are forced to make an adjustment, do so immediately so the change can be less severe, accurate inventories are required. Tools for calculating inventory or for purchasing forage can be found at: <https://livestock.extension.wisc.edu/decision-tools-and-software/>
- If you found some emergency feed, CRP acres, usually idle ground, and the quality is low, allocate to replacement animals, supplemented with concentrates to get the energy adequate or include at a low level into the lactation diets.
- As you read this, emergency alternative opportunities have passed, such things as growing drought tolerant sorghums, or August seeding of oats for fall harvest. Harvesting soybeans for silage may still be an option. Seeding triticale or rye or other spring harvested mixtures may give you more forage earlier next spring than if you do not grow winter annuals.
- Do everything possible to minimize shrink, this should always be the case.

- Since the drought, and subsequent forage shortage began, there have been reasonable opportunities to contract corn and byproducts such as corn gluten feed, distiller's grain and other high fiber feeds at reasonable cost. High fiber feeds, can replace forage fiber, extending your forage inventory. Thank weak exports and much of the rest of the country having better growing conditions that reasonably priced alternatives have been available. Other high fiber, forage extending, byproduct feeds: soy hulls, cottonseed, wheat middlings
- If corn didn't pollinate well, starch may also need to be extended not just fiber, in addition to the byproducts already mentioned consider whey to replace starch.
- We couldn't predict the drought this year, you never can, a good idea is to insure crops and dairy margin.
- This is probably not the year to push for high forage diets! There is a broad range of forage inclusion in dairy diets and it can easily go below 40% forage if the type and amount of fiber is adequate.

A combination of the above will get you there. Dropping the herd size, even just 1-2 % will often not reduce milk production, because of cows adjusting favorably to less crowding. Reducing replacement herd as it is often the case there are more than needed, Increasing the amount of purchased feed, and the fiber level of that purchased feed (byproducts) , increasing the concentrate in the ration, usually will not harm animal performance especially if the adjustments are spread out over the entire year. Feeding some other feed, not usually seen, be it emergency seeded crops or CRP hay, can help if it is allocated to the right group and used in moderation.

If you have to purchase corn that you were supposed to grow, I feel this will be more economical than purchasing hay from out of state, but in either case, purchasing feed that you hadn't intended will probably get your banker's attention. Tell them your plans first, they have heard there was a drought this year.

If you have not tried it before, wouldn't some triticale look nice next May, ready to go into the bunker?

Droughts are recalled similarly to hurricanes. Katrina and Maria compare to 1976, 1988, 2012, etc. Few of us today recall the dust bowl years, but they were substantial. We share stories, like "remember the year we harvested the cattail pond, to feed the steers?" Problems need to be looked at as opportunities, this year can be the opportunity of 2023.