

Strategies for Extending Forage Inventories for Dairy Producers

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Many producers have limited supplies of forage and limited prospects of harvesting additional forage unless they have irrigation or the drought breaks. Given the limited resources, many producers should be developing strategies for how they can deal with the drought. Several options exist and each producer must consider which option fits their situation the best.

1. Take inventory of all forages. This information will allow you to determine how much additional forage will need to be purchased under normal feeding and limited forage feeding programs. If inventories are low, producers should begin to identify and secure forage to meet their needs.
2. Sell out. This is the most drastic option, but it may be the best option for any producer with very limited supplies of forage who are planning to retire in the near future. In other cases, it may be desirable to sell the lactating cows or replacement heifers to reduce overall forage needs.
3. Cull the herd. Most producers have cows that they hang on to until they are completely unprofitable. When forage supplies are very limited, these cows should be sold earlier to extend the forage supply for those that will remain. If the herd is overcrowded, this may not reduce milk yield as much as expected, especially if feed bunk space is limited. Use DHIA records to identify cows that could potentially be culled because of low production, chronic mastitis, bad feet and legs, or poor reproduction.
4. Send heifers to a contract grower. This would reduce the amount feed needed and could reduce total operating cost. If heifers are not currently grown to calve at 24 months of age or labor is limited, this option may actually reduce your cost of growing heifers while freeing up forage for the lactating cows.
5. Identify available sources of forage for purchase. This may be the most difficult option regionally as everyone is looking for hay. Given the shift of total acreage to corn, less forage is expected to be harvested. If a neighbor has land they originally planned to plant in cotton or peanuts that has not been planted, there could be a possibility of getting them to plant summer annuals for forage instead if they have some irrigation.
6. Develop limited forage rations. Work with your nutritionist to develop rations based on high-fiber byproducts that can be fed with limited amounts of forage. Research has shown that rations can be fed with only forage providing only 15% of the ration dry matter. Although these types of diets are not typically recommended, during a drought this approach will help stretch forage inventories. See “Rations with Limited Forage” by Lane Ely for examples and additional information.

7. Improved forage storage. Storage losses can be significant. To reduce losses, producers should help employees understand the importance of packing silage to achieve a density of at least 15 lbs. DM/ ft³ and covering the silage as soon as possible after filling to minimize spoilage. Spoilage in the top 3 feet of a silo that is not covered is 17 to 30% greater than in a properly covered silo. The cover with a UV inhibitor should be used and enough material placed on top to prevent air from getting under the cover. Hay stored outside ideally would be covered. If not covered, round bales should be placed in rows oriented north and south to allow the sun to dry the hay after a rain. Some space should be left between the bales to allow for air circulation. Never place bales under trees that limit drying and increase spoilage.

8. Reduce feeding waste. As much as 25% of the hay in a round bale is lost during storage and feeding. Producers should work to minimize feeding losses of forage, especially hay. This may mean processing hay, limit or hand feeding, or changing the type of hay feeder used. Given the limited supply and cost of hay currently, producers need to get the most out of each bale.

These are some of the options producers should consider to deal with the limited forage supplies caused by the drought. The options that are feasible or unfeasible will differ among dairies, but producers must start planning now so they can look at all of the options available to them rather than waiting.