

# Dairy specialist: Farmers should stretch forage supplies

BY DANIEL GRANT

FarmWeek

The drought last year forced many dairy farmers to generate as much forage as possible to replace short crops of hay and corn.

Some farmers harvested additional cuttings of hay last fall while others chopped drought-stressed corn, baled cornstalks, or planted cereal-grain forages such as oats, barley, or triticale.

The resourcefulness allowed many farmers to maintain their dairy herds through the year, but Mike Hutjens, University of Illinois Extension dairy specialist, is concerned about feed supplies in the months ahead.

"You've heard of the fiscal cliff. Well, we have a forage cliff out there," Hutjens told dairy producers last week at the 2013 Dairy Summit at the Illinois Farm Bureau Building in Bloomington.

The event was hosted by the Illinois Milk Producers Association.

"It concerns me if some farmers run out of silage by April or May," Hutjens said. If feed use is on pace to deplete silage supplies in coming months, "I'd back off now rather than run out in May."

Hutjens advised dairy producers to stretch silage supplies as long as possible, but he urged farmers not to reduce feed rations, which could negatively affect herd health and milk production.

"Forages are really tough to find at this stage of the game," he said. "But don't cheat those cows. Never give up milk."

A productive dairy cow produces about 2 pounds of milk for each pound of dry matter. Current feed and milk prices suggest a profit of 25 cents per cow per pound of dry matter, according to Hutjens.

Dairy farmers who are running low on silage should consider adding straw or cornstalks to their rations and buying forage extenders such as fuzzy cottonseed, corn gluten,

citrus pulp, beet pulp, or soy hulls.

Meanwhile, farmers who have corn silage or grain in storage should continue to monitor those crops.

Drought-stressed corn silage tests have shown higher levels of starch and sugar, Hutjens noted.

"Test, test, test (silage) because this crop is moving on you," he told dairy farmers. "It (the variability of silage tests) is unbelievable."

Meanwhile, issues with aflatoxin that cooled off this winter could resurface when the temperature heats up this spring.

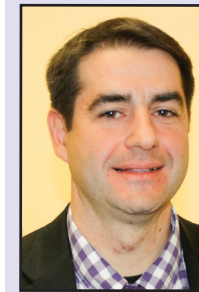
"The problem (with aflatoxin) has died down for now," Hutjens said. "But corn bins in March, April, and May are going to warm up, and we're going to grow more aflatoxin."

Hutjens advised dairy farmers to keep corn in storage at less than 14 percent moisture, use mycotoxin binders (flow agents) in feed, and remove any at-risk feed to reduce issues with aflatoxin.

Potential aflatoxin issues in feed are not a human health risk because every load of milk is tested before it leaves the farm, Hutjens noted. Illinois farmers in the past year dumped 1 million to 2 million pounds of milk due to the presence of aflatoxin.

## New dairy specialist focuses on efficiency

Dairy farmers in Illinois who have questions or concerns about production issues now can consult with "Dr. Phil" for answers.



Phil Cardoso

Phil Cardoso, a veterinarian who was introduced last week at the Dairy Summit in Bloomington as "Dr. Phil," is the new University of Illinois Extension dairy research specialist.

Cardoso is from Brazil, where he worked as a veterinarian. He came to Illinois in 2009 to finish his degree. He also studied U.S. dairy systems in California and Wisconsin.

"We're happy he's our new dairy Extension specialist in Illinois," said Dave Fischer, retired U of I dairy specialist.

One of Cardoso's key areas of research focuses on ways to improve management of the transition cow.

The transition period for a dairy cow is three weeks before and three weeks after calving. Cows are more prone to diseases and other issues during the transition period.

"The transition period is a very challenging time for cows," Cardoso said. "It costs dairy farmers a lot (in terms of veterinary bills and lost milk production)."

Cardoso believes controlled energy diets may help reduce the peaks and valleys for transitioning dairy cows.

Overall, Cardoso said his goals for the Illinois dairy herd are to minimize health disorders and maximize production and reproduction. "All of this is going to bring more profit," he said. "That's the idea."

Cardoso plans to survey Illinois dairy farmers to identify current challenges in the industry so he can refine his research in an effort to find solutions to those challenges.

"What I want is a two-way conversation so we can find solutions for what's challenging on your farms," he told farmers at the Dairy Summit.

Farmers in Illinois can learn more about dairy research at a new website {dairyfocus.illinois.edu}, which will be active next month, or contact Cardoso at 217-300-2303 or email him at cardoso2@illinois.edu. — Daniel Grant

## Okerlund: Farmers face high level of uncertainty

Many farmers appear to be in a comfortable position heading into this year's growing season.

USDA recently predicted record-high farm income for 2012 based in part on record-high commodity prices and crop insurance payments.

But underneath the rosy forecast uncertainty is rampant in the industry as many farmers attempt to deal with record-high feed and other input costs, an unstable world economy, wild weather fluctuations, the possibility of more government regulations, and numerous other unknowns, according to David Okerlund.

Okerlund is a former farm chemical salesman and counselor who now is a motivational speaker.

"The average farmer is becoming more consumed with uncertainty," Okerlund said last week at the Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association convention in Peoria. "The question is how do they deal with an unrelenting world of change."

Okerlund advised ag input suppliers at the event to build relationships with their customers to better understand their needs.

"You (input suppliers) need to understand what you offer customers," such as providing value, reliability, and a fair price, Okerlund said.

Okerlund counseled farm families during difficult economic times in the 1980s and after the 1993 flood. He said he is concerned uncertainty in the industry will continue a trend of driving the younger generation away from farms.

The average age of farm operators increased from 50.3 years in 1978 to 57.1 years in 2007 and likely is higher than that now.

"The greatest effect of all the uncertainty will be on the younger generation's ability to carry on the family farm," Okerlund said. "In 1984, I counseled young people who talked about running away from home to take the (financial) burden off their parents."

USDA in its 2012 Census of Agriculture will report whether more young farmers have stayed or returned to the farm in the past five years.

All farmers and ranchers should have received a census form in the mail by early January. Completed forms are due Feb. 4. — Daniel Grant



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