



ADVANCED AG SYSTEMS'S

Crop Soil News

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"It is the crops
that feed the
cows that make
the milk which
creates the
money."

2011 The Year We Would Like to Forget

2011 will go down in many farmers' minds as one of the most frustrating years in their farming history from the standpoint of the beating that nature has thrown at them. Floods, extreme dry, hail, insects, and disease, we have had them all. As I visit farms, the one thing that has struck me is the farmers who are weathering the disasters the best have focused on, and continue to focus on, the basics. Yes, they had a down year, but they will survive.

As I listed in the August issue: you are there to profit selling milk. You need to produce at a price that is less than what you sell it for. The rest of the producers are finally catching onto what we were recommending in the early 1990's; that high forage diets of high quality forage can give you profitability. Dairy magazines are now full of these articles, with some farms successfully supporting high milk on 75% forage diets. They capitalize on the fact that protein and energy from high quality forages cost two thirds or half of the same unit of protein or energy from concentrate. High forage diets are not a guarantee of profit. Profitable, 70%+ forage farms, are fanatics on high yielding forage quality. They are also fanatics on cost as cost of those forages depends on you. I had one farm that the most profitable decision was to harvest first cut orchardgrass the end of June and stuff the cows with grain as it was cheaper than his present forage program.

Profitable forage programs are built on the basics. Buildings need good foundations, so do forage programs. Successful high forage feeders test their forage multiple times a year; when was the last time you tested your soil? 3 years, 5 years, never?? If you are going to produce profitable forage, you need to KNOW, not guess, what is limiting on your fields. I recently took over managing a research farm where we found sulfur was limiting on alfalfa and so our experiment added sulfur – with no resulting increase in yield or quality as happened on the other 10 sites in the state. That is because the ph was 5.8. Looking at a nice alfalfa field does not tell you what is limiting or how to reach its maximum potential. Only a soil test will do that. It is similar to you trying to feed a high forage diet and not having enough water for the cows – you need to meet the basic needs of the animal and of the crops. Many farms miss the basics by using sequential monoculture. That is where they grow many years of a row crop (5 – 8 years corn) and many years of a hay crop (6 – 10 years hay) on the same fields without switching them. Because the rotation is not written down, this sneaks up on you, removing the profit and increasing the cost of your "profitable high forage" diet. You can easily determine your true rotation by taking the number of acres of rotate-able fields and divide it by the number of acres that you seed down. Is the answer 6 – 7 or 16 – 17; it affects the yield, quality, and profit.

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The other rotation limitation is that it takes effort to implement. This is where that bottom field produces nice corn so we leave it in year after year. Costs meanwhile skyrocket as we have to buy ever more expensive stacked varieties to control all the pests that attack it (see photos at right). Nutrients get further out of line as manure is poured on in an attempt to maintain yields. Weather seems to take an ever big chunk out of production as it is to wet, or to dry, but rarely just right. Meanwhile the cost of producing forage has crept up, robbing you of potential profit in high forage diets. Across the road, the upland field is in “alfalfa” for 7 – 8 years. It is 98% alfalfa on 5% of the field yet it remains because we are too busy to figure how to get more forage off of it.



Multi year corn with 3 herbicide trips and expensive side dressed nitrogen increases the cost of protein and energy from your forage

In high forage feeding it is a critical basic principle that **“SOILS DRIVE THE ROTATION THAT DRIVES WHAT THE COWS ARE FED.”** Dr. Chase at Cornell has said he can use any forage as long as it is of high quality. Some farms are all haylage, others all corn silage, most a mix between. Many are adding the highly digestible winter triticale forage to the mix. The take home message is that you need to individualize your fields to maximize both their production (yield) and their quality in order to have a profitable high forage diet. Rotations start with taking out a sod field, and finish by seeding a row crop back to hay again. NOW is the time to make those decisions. Sod fields sprayed in the fall can be no-till, zone tilled, or one pass minimum till planted in the spring for a tremendous savings in time, fuel, and soil. In years such as this, it was the difference between a crop and none as the planting window was closed by our increasingly variable weather. For \$15 of herbicide and application, less than the cost of moleboard plowing and disking, the sod can be completely killed. The later you wait, the less control you have of the old alfalfa. The next spring the soil is dry, warm, mellow, and loose enough for no till planting. The tough perennials are under control so spring herbicide can be a simple, low cost mix.



Rotated corn the other side of the hedgerow with just starter N and one herbicide application. You can't buy the results you get from rotation

The fall is also the time for spreading lime. As you saw in my example above with sulfur, lime is a foundation of your crop program. If there is residue or a cover crop, or a hay field, the lime will not wash off in the winter runoff. The time to put on lime is now.

Basics are not as much fun as the latest wow, gee wiz genetics or additive. It is the fundamentals of farming that will keep you profitable as we go into more variable economics and even more variable weather.

Sincerely,

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Hand
to Better
Agriculture**

