

Using Corn as an Emergency Forage Crop

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

When we didn't receive any appreciable rainfall last weekend it pretty well doomed much of the corn crop to not being harvested for grain. We generally feel that if corn isn't going to produce at least 50 bushels per acre of grain it is better to harvest it for livestock feed. This year we have a lot of corn that in all honesty won't even make 25 bushels per acre so harvesting it for livestock feed is likely the best use of that crop.

There are numerous considerations that a producer needs to keep in mind before doing anything however. First and foremost, assuming that the crop is insured, talk with your insurance agent to get it appraised. If you do anything prior to an appraiser issuing a decision, you may have eliminated any chance for a payment. Second thing you really need to do is to sit down with the herbicide labels of the products you used to make sure that there are no restrictions in utilizing that corn for hay, silage or even grazing. Fortunately many corn herbicides include silage corn as an accepted use so residue testing has been done.

You have four choices in using corn as a forage crop. You can hay it, you can cut it for silage, you can put it up as baleage, or you can graze it. While cutting it for silage or baleage is likely the best way to utilize drought stressed corn, haying and grazing are also options. Part of the decision has to come down to what are you best set up to handle and more importantly how high will the nitrates be in the harvested forage.

Baleage is a nice option in between silage and haying. It is put up at 45 to 60% moisture, as opposed to 65 to 70% moisture with ensiling, or 15% moisture when putting it up as hay. Baling it for hay may take several weeks to get the moisture content of the stalks low enough that it won't spoil or be a fire risk. The challenge with baleage is finding the equipment to do the bale wrapping. Baleage is not a normal practice around here because we usually don't have a problem getting forages dry enough to bale.

Nitrates are a normal constituent of many compounds in a plant. When nitrates are properly allocated and utilized in a plant they aren't a problem. But when we start to utilize drought stressed forages we can have free nitrates in the plant that haven't been put where they should be. If the nitrates are high enough they can become toxic to cattle. In haying and grazing this can be a real issue. Nitrates don't disappear when a crop is harvested or allowed to dry down. However, if the corn is harvested for silage or baleage, nitrates are generally reduced by 40 to 50% by the ensiling process.

Quality of forage (feed value) of drought stunted corn is roughly equal to average brome grass. Lack of grain in the corn lowers its crude protein but it can range from 8 to 10%. Part of the challenge is that we are somewhat lacking in good data on feed value because we don't normally harvest corn as a forage before it makes a grain crop. If you do harvest corn for forage, I'd encourage you to take a sample for analysis. For hay or baleage, borrow one of our forage samplers. For silage, just take a sample after it's ensiled for about 6 weeks. Bring it in the office and we'll send it off for analysis. This way we'll know exactly what we are working with so you can feed it appropriately and we'll also know the nitrate levels so we can also feed it safely.

The last time we had a drought this bad, we weren't growing nearly as much corn. So for many of you, and me, we are in to uncharted waters here. But if we take this drought one step at a time and make sound decisions, we'll make it through.