
Grazing Crop Residues - Risk and Reward

Question: I want to turn out the stock cows onto milo stalks. The dry weather and frost combined have resulted in growth of some new shoots. How much risk is there for the cattle?

The biggest concern is the potential for prussic acid poisoning. If the cattle have been on the field the new shoots gradually appearing pose little risk as the cattle will develop a tolerance. Cattle being moved to the field would have risk if they are able to walk the rows and readily select the potentially potent green shoots. Once the cold weather kills the sorghum plant the prussic acid potential quickly dissipates. Prussic acid is a potential risk when grazing any sorghum species with growth less than 18 inches. The risk increases if these small shoots are injured, but not killed by frost.

Nitrate is less of a concern, but the sorghum species and millets are potential nitrate accumulators. Nitrate can become high in forage which has less than proper growth due to growing condition stresses. Very low yields due to drought would be an example of those stresses. The number one way to avoid possible nitrate poisoning is to gradually introduce new feeds. If moving to a milo stalk pasture, move the cattle in the afternoon after they are filled up on their current ration. If they have been eating hay, move a couple of the bales with them so they will mix the diet for a few days. Observe the cattle closely for a few days after the move. Cattle can and do increase tolerance levels to nitrates if properly introduced to the new feeds. Most dramatic cases of nitrate poisoning have occurred when feeding very high feeds following a snowstorm which has limited feed for the cattle for a several days.

Question: Should I be concerned about the cattle having access to an alfalfa field along with my stalk pastures?

Like the milo, the combination of drought dormancy and rain this fall have really greened up the alfalfa fields. This does pose a risk of bloat for the cattle is they can get enough intake. Dr Bruce Anderson says that if the alfalfa has 4 inches or more growth on it, the intake rate and the lushness could pose a threat. Unlike the nitrate situation, cattle do not become more tolerant to the risk of bloat. Watch cattle closely and consider fencing them out of alfalfa fields.

The cattle hoof action damage to alfalfa fields in the moister situation should also be considered if allowing cattle access to these fields.

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