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AVOID PROBLEMS WITH SWEET CLOVER

Have you noticed an abundance of yellow sweet clover this summer? This can be good or bad. The upside is sweet clover is a legume and good for the soil and a major source of nectar for domestic honey bees. The downside is sweet clover contains a chemical compound known as coumarin which causes the forage to taste bitter and reduces palatability when pastures are grazed and caution when making hay. Cattle may pick at it a little bit, consequently they will graze sweet clover sparingly when first turned onto it. They can, however, become more accustomed to it.

With the rain we have experienced this spring and early summer, even on marginal ground, this biennial plant in its second year will grow tall and produce an abundant amount of biomass as it thrusts a taproot and branches deep into subsoil layers. Early in the second year it provides new top growth to protect the soil surface as its roots anchor the soil profile. It is the most drought-tolerant of forage legumes, is quite winter-hardy and can extract deep from the soil then release phosphorus, potassium and other micronutrients to the surface that are otherwise unavailable to crops. That's why sweet clover was the "king" of green manure crops in the south and Midwest in the first half of this century.

After blooming, the plants get stemmy and woody, reducing both feed value and palatability. Even young plants are quite bitter, so if other plants are available to graze, cattle eat only limited amounts of sweet clover. This greatly reduces bloat hazards, which is a risk when sweet clover is abundant.

Your biggest risk from sweet clover is in hay, specifically, in moldy hay. Spoiled sweet clover in hay bales, produces a chemical called dicoumarin that interferes with metabolism and synthesis of vitamin K. Without vitamin K, blood will not clot properly after an injury and blood can even seep out of otherwise healthy blood vessels. That's why sweet clover poisoning also is called sweet clover bleeding disease.

We don't see this very often but this year I throw this out there as a caution. We have had a few examples over the years where there has never been a problem, then a year comes along when the hay did not get put up right and health effects in cattle occur. As long as you make sure hay containing sweet clover is extra dry before baling and storing to prevent mold it will greatly reduce that risk. Mold can develop on perfectly dry bales so if the bales get wet, that can cause an issue. That's why these kinds of bales should always be net wrapped or stored indoors.

If you must feed a moldy sweet clover bale, alternate by feeding moldy hay for a week followed by alfalfa or other non-moldy forage for a week. This intermittent feeding is safer than mixing good and moldy hay together or through a grinder.

Sound management will enable you to handle the bad with the good when sweet clover is abundant in hay.

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