Nitrate Rumors Can Kill Cattle

Neighbors, friends, and coffee shops can give great advice, but lately some of the information being spread about nitrates in corn stalks is wrong and could prove deadly. Watch for rumors about nitrates in corn stalks. Some rumors I've heard lately might mislead you into losing some of your cattle.

For example, some people say that after a freeze the nitrates will leave the stalk. So it should be safe to bale or graze corn stalks after it freezes even if the stalks currently contain high nitrates. In real life, though, a freeze probably will have no effect at all on nitrate levels. Almost all our corn plants will be mature and dead before it freezes this fall. And if some plants are still green and alive, a freeze might actually cause a brief increase in nitrate levels.

Other folks assume it will be safe to graze stalks after grain harvest. And in most situations they are correct, but not all the time. Nitrates do tend to decline as plants mature, and plants that produce grain tend to have lower nitrate concentrations. Also, the husks and leaves that cattle prefer only rarely have high nitrate concentrations.

But notice that I didn't say always. I used the words tend and rarely. This has been a stressful year. Dryland fields still may have high nitrates, especially in that lower stalk. You may be tempted to force animals to graze stalks a bit harder than usual this year. Cattle may start out selecting safe husks and leaves, but as that supply declines they will graze more of the lower stalks with potentially dangerous nitrate concentrations.

Play it safe. Before grazing, sample your stalks. Check nitrates in the lower foot of stalk. Check nitrates in the upper portion along with leaves and husks. What you discover could save your animals' lives.

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