November 3, 2017

GRAZING CORN ON THE GROUND

Corn on the ground is a huge issue that many are having this year and many people are looking for a way to deal with it. The wetting and drying cycles and wind were the culprits and we have reports of 5-35 bushel per acre on the ground or more in places. I feel really bad for anyone caught up in these large field losses this year.

Estimating Corn Loss: A method to estimate pre-harvest loss of ears on the ground is to count the number of ears dropped in 1/100 of an acre. For a row spacing of 30 inches, measure off 29 feet for a 6-row header, 21' 9" for an 8-row header, and 14' 6" for a 12-row header. Then count the number of ears dropped in that header width and length measured. In general, a full-size ear equates to around ¾ of a pound and would be around one bushel/acre yield loss. Large ears with deep kernels may be closer to 1.5 bushels/acre yield loss. At a 10 bushels/acre loss that equals 560 pounds of corn grain/acre so a 130 acre pivot would have 36 tons of feed (corn grain) on the ground!

Limiting access is really the only option when grazing with heavy corn down. Any amount beyond 8-10 bushels/acre down will require a well-planned grazing strategy to ensure that not too much grain is being consumed by grazing cattle and that you don't turn one problem into another!

For grazing, the least risk is to graze calves or cull cows through first. This is the best and safest option. Yearlings are inexperienced grazers which helps and can easily gain one and one-half to two pounds per day on corn forage and usually more.

The next safest, or plan B, is to give cull cows a daily allotment that would not allow cows to eat more than 5 pounds of corn a day. Dry cows really don't need the grain. With so much down corn and very few people having calves to graze (and not enough cull cows), well then it's usually plan C.

Dr. Mary Drewnoski, beef specialist at UNL, typically suggests that you work cows up to 10 pounds of corn grain over a 7 to 10 day period before turning out AND then still limit access to the amount of corn such that they don't eat more than 15 pounds or so for the next few weeks. Unless you have 7,000 cows to turn out on one pivot, you will need to limit access to residue acres at least for another two weeks, slowly increasing the amount of acres they get each day, until you can give them full access (after they are adapted to a very high corn diet).

Cows that have previously grazed stalks will seek out corn, and if given the ability (i.e. have access to enough), will make a diet consisting solely of corn grain. No buffer chemical is going to allow un-adapted cows to do this without acidosis. Think about it this way, when we are stepping up feedlot animals do we feed a buffer and give them full access to a finishing diet? Instead we slowly work them up adding more and more grain to the diet over time (3 weeks is typical). This is what we need to do with cows in excessive ear drop situations.

You can contact Dr. Drewnoski at 402-472-6289 or mary.drewnoski@unl.edu and she can help you work up a plan to reduce risk. Currently, she is getting 4-5 calls per day. She needs to know the number of cows, estimated weights and/or yearlings and the actual ear drop estimate that you have. Further resource material and recommendations can be found at the following excellent beef website https://beef.unl.edu/estimating-bushels-corn-ground-counting-ears-prior-grazing-cattle

There may be some fields with enough corn on the ground it could pay a farmer if he could find and settle on the labor cost. Could there be a 4-H club, FFA chapter or church group? It would most likely need to be a decent Saturday or school out day. Day light is getting shorter. A combine on the end of the field, 5 gallon buckets and two tractors with loaders would be the way to go. It's a lot of exercise, labor and work and it depends how much is on the ground. If only we could increase the price of corn as an incentive.

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