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For more information,
Contact: Wendie Powell
Livestock Production Agent, Wildcat Extension District
wendiepowell@ksu.edu, (620) 784-5337

Grazing Corn Stalks

Advancements in equipment and technology have made it easier than ever to take livestock to feed instead of bringing the feed to them, which saves producers time and money.

When grazing corn residue, cattle will select and eat the grain first, and then the husk and leaf, and finally the cob and stalk. Unless the corn field has experienced high winds leaving a lot of corn left in the field, there's usually less than a bushel of ear drop per acre. The husk and leaf diet will provide around 50 percent total digestible nutrients and about 5 percent crude protein.

Weather is the major factor that determines the number of grazing days. Cows can successfully graze corn residue fields that have 4 to 6 inches of snow cover. But, they can't graze fields that are covered with ice.

The leaf and husk yield left in the field is related to corn grain yield. The amount of grain, leaf, and husk available will determine the forage quality. There will be about 16 pounds of dry leaf and husk per bushel of corn yield.

You'll want to keep your livestock from consuming the lowest-quality stalks and cobs and some dry matter is lost to trampling or weathering, so assume 50% harvest efficiency. To figure stocking density, you can use a simple rule of thumb for quick estimates: Bushels per acre divided by 3.5 equals grazing days per acre for a 1,200-pound cow. So, if the field yielded 150 bushels per acre, divide 150 by 3 and a half, giving you 42.8. So, you have enough residue for about 42 grazing days. There are more exact formulas available if this sounds too close to cowboy math for you. And, the University of Nebraska has created a fairly easy to use Corn Stalk Grazing Calculator.

Ordinarily, dry cows will maintain body weight, and may even gain weight, using these strategies. Research out of Nebraska suggests that March calving cows didn't change reproductive performance or body condition score whether or not these cows received supplemented protein. The need for protein supplement may change though as the grazing season progresses, depending on the gestation phase. Salt, mineral, and Vitamin A supplements are recommended for all cattle grazing crop residues.

It is advisable to test the crop for nitrates before grazing, especially if it was drought stressed. Nitrate toxicity symptoms can range from reduced appetite to death if not monitored and managed. Nitrate presence can be quick tested in the field, and a measurement of the level of nitrates in the plant can be lab tested.

As an added bonus to the more economical grazing, cows will return nutrients to the land in the form of manure, and they'll eat corn grain that has fallen on the ground, which may reduce the amount of volunteer corn in a field the following year.

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