While we may not want to consider it, winter is coming. This year started with most market analysts predicting lower crop prices and advising farmers to protect themselves and prepare accordingly. However as the year has progressed, high rainfall and unusual weather patterns have led to delayed planting, poor hay yields, higher crop prices, and an overall increase in the cost of doing business. With this in mind, it may be time to talk about proper preparation going into this winter. As most of the US is dealing with a forage shortage and planting delays, there are a few things producers should consider as they plan for the months ahead.

1.) Forage will be in short supply: how much do goats really need each day? Small ruminants can handle a lower percentage of forage in their daily consumption than large ruminates. As such, we can replace a portion of the forage with products like our grains, or pelleted forages. For instance, 1 pound of corn has approximately the energy equivalent of 2 pounds of good forage. Providing just a little bit of grain each day can reduce the overall hay consumption or need. It is important to note however that grain affects the body differently than forage. While forage will put on fat more evenly between internal and external fat; grain will put on more internal fat than external. With this in mind, it is important never to lean too heavily upon grains when replacing forage. The general rule of thumb is to never replace more than 50% of the forage need with grain per day. Remember to always test all stored forages too. It doesn’t matter when it was cut, how it looks, or how confident a producer is in their ability to identify good forage testing is a necessity. Good forage cannot be identified by sight alone! Use these forage analysis’s to balance the feeding program and to buy the right supplement. Test the forage, buy the right supplement, and be ready to use it in the months to come.

2.) Costs will go up this is a certainty. Whether feeding a purchased hay or hay produced on farm, costs will most certainly go up. Rapid growth of forages, along with more mature forage harvest will lead to poorer nutrient values of the forages regardless of how good it looks physically. In addition, mature forages will have higher ADF and NDF levels which will directly impact the willingness and quantity of consumption per day. This will be a constant and greater supplementation may be needed to meet the daily nutritional needs of stock. Consider purchasing and stockpiling forage now while prices are lower. Take time to calculate what will be needed between now and May 15th of next year and be willing to reduce livestock numbers if necessary. It is always better to have a herd reduction before running out of feedstuffs. Don’t wait until November to take stock of need and supply.

3.) Look at the guarantee and analysis of grain formulas before purchase. With rising prices it is important to note what is in a feed and whether or not it is needed. As an example: if a producer buys good quality hay with higher protein and good digestibility they can possibly save money in their grain ration by buying a lower protein product. If additional protein isn’t needed or beneficial; do not buy it. Additionally, look at the fiber contents of feeds and the carbohydrate sources. Higher fiber feeds will lower the fiber need in pounds of forage per day. Ingredients like Barley are lower acidity and higher fiber than corn and as a result also can be used to both replace some corn and reduce forage need. Regardless of the fiber content of the feed though, some actual forage will be needed to provide fill factor and rumen buffer. A grain only diet loses efficiency and will only increase the risks of metabolic diseases such as pregnancy toxemia. Unlike forage, stockpiling grains would not be recommended in most cases. Although grain prices are rising and that may lead to the knee jerk reaction to buy up grains now; be cautious in that pursuit. Once feed is mixed or pelleted it is best to feed it within 30 days. Beyond that point, feeds dry out, go stale, and lose desirability. Additionally vitamins have a recognized shelf life of 6 months. If feed is stockpiled, the quality will only go down some for every day of additional storage.

4.) Wet and warm years are great if you are a parasite! Be mindful of your parasite loads. Wet years mean more worms. More worms in a goat will increase the nutrition that must be offered. With the growing shortage of hay and affordable feed, make sure valuable resources are not wasted feeding unnecessary parasites. Do not whole herd worm though! Run fecals often and treat only those that need help.

Each year comes with its own challenges and this year is no exception. As producers, it is important that we not only consider these challenges, but that we also prepare well in advance for what we know is ahead. Remember, topography and availability varies region to region. Spending a little extra time with your veterinarian and nutritionist now may save you substantially as you prepare for the coming winter. The window of opportunity based on availability is narrowing each day.