Every year around this time I start receiving calls regarding hay supply and the price of forage offered on the open market. This year has been a bit different in the sheer numbers of producers needing to purchase more forage or extend the forage they have stored. Although the year was a good one to produce hay in most of the US, the number of animals on feed has increased. The effects of Covid 19 on processing plants and the market in general have not only increased the livestock needing to be fed but drove up commodity markets at the same time. As forage becomes a focal point for many producers, a broader conversation about forage waste and extension must be had. Forage waste after all is a frustrating problem each year. The ground around feeders quickly build up with the wasted forage and manure, and make conditions around the feeder conducive to health and hoof problems. With this in mind how can a producer reduce some of this waste and extend the stored forage available?

Extending forages is often easier than reducing waste however both need to be addressed by the producer. One of the easiest ways to extend forage is through the use of grain supplemention, protein tubs, or limit feeding. Grain supplements and protein tubs can be effective extenders of forage when used correctly but they must be carefully designed and fed. Too much grain will increase the risks of metabolic disorders such as pregnancy toxemia whereas too little will not sufficiently reduce forage consumption. In spite of this, grain supplementation can reduce the forage necessary per head per day dramatically. In most cases 1 pound of grain can replace 2 pounds of good forage and goats can have up to 50% of the forage needed per day replaced with a properly balanced supplement. Any supplement fed must reflect the nutritional strengths and weaknesses in the forage fed though. This will require proper forage testing prior to the supplement selection. Additionally, while grain can replace forage it will digest differently and can easily increase birth weights when fed too heavily. Limit feeding can have a dramatic effect on forage use as well. When possible offer only the forage necessary to last 1 day. This feeding practice will encourage less waste per feeding and allow for a controllable forage replacement through grain or protein tub supplementation. Although it can be inconvenient to jump through the hoops necessary to extend forage as the winter progresses, it will always be worth the time and efforts when forage is in short supply.

When it comes to hay wastage, it is not just what you feed but how you store and feed it that matters. Up to 27% of forage will be wasted from ground storage alone and an additional 2-60% will be wasted when feeding. This forage waste negatively impacts the sod, increases erosion, promotes weed pressure , and can be very costly for the producer. Goats are browsers and generally prefer to eat plants or forages that are the height of or higher than their chest floor. Many times due to the size of the group being fed and the type of hay offered, ring feeders are used to feed forage on the ground. When these ground feeding type feeders are used the bottom 10” of the bale is often wasted because of this browsing preference. This preference however can be utilized to the benefit of the producer to improve forage usage and reduce waste when bales of hay are only offered in feeders that keep the hay off the ground and within a goats preferred eating range. It is not just the height of the forage offered that matters though. The amount of weather each bale receives during storage and/or feeding also matters tremendously. When possible hay feeders should provide cover to prevent direct exposure to the elements. Changing the location that the hay is offered and utilizing a goat’s browsing preference can make the largest impact on the quantity of wasted forage from each bale.

Forage is a critical part of goat production and the quantity required each year can be dramatically impacted by waste. With the cold weather quickly settling in and stored forage use increasing, many producers may find themselves feeding more hay than they expected simply due to the amount their goats waste from each bale. Adjusting feeding practices and extending forage reserves when possible can not only reduce the costs of production but also improve the health of the herd at the same time. As always take time to re-evaluate forage inventory and feeding practices to improve your bottom line this winter.

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