Grain prices are high, forage in many parts of the country is in short supply, and winter is coming. As producers look forward into the coming months, it can look a bit discouraging but it is not hopeless. Markets and forage vary year to year and thankfully there are many things each producer can do to not only survive the coming months but improve their profitability at the same time.

In past articles I have written extensively about the need to test all forages before feeding them. It is especially important this year because much like the 2019 hay crop, the 2021 hay crop for much of the US is poor quality. It was cut late, flooded out, rained on, and in general hard to put up in the spring and then dry and poor growing the rest of the summer. The rapid growth from the high rainfall totals in the spring lead to forage that may have looked good but unfortunately, did not have the nutritive value of years past. The drier weather pattern that followed for the rest of the summer lead to many forages producing fewer total tons of hay in the following cuttings. Our farm unfortunately was no exception this year. This was magnified once we tested all of the stored cuttings. Typically, our blended alfalfa hay tests at 145 or higher RFV (relative feed value). This year our best hay only tested 105.80 RFV. Once the quality of forage was revealed through testing it became obvious that in the coming months additional (and more expensive than years past) grain supplementation will have to be fed. This will be the heart of the problem for many producers this year. I have said it many times over the years, but I will say it again. If it has not already been done, test all forages! Testing a forage is the greatest way to determine the quantity and type of supplementation that may be needed. When tested, some of our blended alfalfa forage this year was as low as 13.17% protein with a RFV of only 104.31. This is not terrible forage but in years past this cutting would have tested at 17-19% protein and have had an RFV of 145 or greater. Additionally, our forages have unusually high levels of acid detergent and neutral detergent fiber will reduce the quantity my stock will willingly eat each day. It is important to note that this forage looks good. Upon visual inspection it would generally be expected to test very good. Our forage is not unusual this year. As we have tested forages for other producers this year, high quality forage has really been hit or miss. Without testing many stock may be left in a negative calorie state even with full bellies due to the nutritive value of many forages sitting so low. Please remember; forage quality CAN NOT be determined by visual appearance only.

Once forages are properly analyzed and accounted for every producer should inspect their livestock individually. When it is cold, wet, and nasty outside it can be hard to want to handle each goat at least once a month but it is the most accurate way of determining the body condition score (BCS). It is imperative to document each goat’s overall condition at least once every 30 days to minimize a producer’s risk of under or overfeeding stock. Winter hair coats can make visually assessing conditioning difficult as it is thicker and can make stock look fleshier than they really are. Evaluating at least once a month is also a great way to check the progress of your feeding program. The costs to the producer when a consistent BCS evaluation is not completed can be particularly troublesome as the cost to regain weight on an underweight animal will cost considerably more than the cost of just maintaining an animal. Please remember just like with forage quality, you CAN NOT judge body condition scoring by visual appearance only. You must handle the animal. Once a producer knows the BCS of their stock they can then use the results of their forage testing to determine the kind and quantity of supplement that will need to be offered. Grain is a supplement and as such should reflect the forage program for which it is supplementing. This grain supplement should cover the elements that are lacking in the base forage program in the most efficient manner. If the forage is low in protein, more protein must be supplemented through the grain. If more energy is needed, the grain supplement should be high in energy. Supplements must be selected after testing is done and body condition scoring has been completed. Using the forage test results to select a supplement gives producers the greatest ability to minimize their grain supplement costs by purchasing only the parts they need and cutting the parts they do not. Forage analysis is considerably more complex than just looking at protein and energy but for the sake of explanation using an overly simplified example, imagine a forage that tests very low at only 5% protein but tests high in NFC (Non fiber carbohydrates). If a producer needs to purchase a grain supplement to balance this forage they would need to invest in a high protein grain supplement, with the knowledge that the grain would not need to be high in carbohydrates. By selecting the right grain to balance the forage fed, this producer will be able to feed less of the necessary and expensive grain supplement to accomplish the supplementation necessary and therefore reduce their overall inputs. If this producer did not consider the forage values or weaknesses and simply bought the same supplement they had for the last 10 years, they may find themselves not only feeding more grain supplement to gain the same results hurting their bottom lines, but also have the potential to decrease overall feed efficiency in their herd and growing stock in the process. Please remember nutrition is measured in pounds of intake not percentages but percentages can be used as a way of identifying intake requirements.

Currently every producer is in the same boat looking at high input costs and a winter fast approaching. Each should take the time to evaluate the soundness of their nutrition programs to offset some of these high prices. Winter can test the limits of a nutrition program in a normal year. Take the time to re-evaluate your program and maintain the productive potential of your herds through the remainder of the winter.