

# Regional Dairy Newsletter



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April 2010

## Winter Kill Got You Down? New Forage Varieties and Hybrids May Hold the Answer.

Emily Myers, CCE Regional Dairy Specialist

This winter we received far less snow than normal. In eastern Clinton County in particular, the ground was bare for the majority of the winter months, exposing alfalfa crowns and roots to harsh weather. We only had one or two serious thaw-freeze cycles, but exposed fields in many areas were subject to below zero temperatures multiple times throughout the winter season.

In addition to the snowless fields and thaw-freeze cycles that occurred, many people have begun adding a fourth cutting into their management plans. This fourth cutting can produce an excellent quality feed in moderate quantities, but if done at the wrong time of year, leaves the plant with little energy reserves for the following spring regrowth. Fields cut late in the fall also have minimal stem length and

stubble available to trap air close to the ground and provide protection from the cold.

If the weather conditions this winter weren't enough to wreck your fields, add in the potential effects of brown root rot, alfalfa snout beetle and other stressors from the previous summer and we may be looking at a fair amount of winter kill this year.



This leaves many producers with the question of what to do with these fields? The north eastern region of the US is already experiencing a forage shortage due to less than adequate hay and haylage making opportunities last summer combined with a slow maturing corn crop and wet fall. Ideally, winter killed fields need to be replanted with a rapidly growing, hardy grass or grass-legume mix that will have good yield and quality in the first year, or else we could be facing another year of minimal forage availability.

### In This Issue

	<u>Page</u>
<b>Winter Kill Got You Down?.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Dairy Profit Monitor.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Herd Health Class a Valuable Experience.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Nita's Notes.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Future News/Events.....</b>	<b>7</b>

Several ryegrass varieties (Jeanne or Zorro for example) may be the answer to this dilemma. New Italian ryegrass varieties (such as Green Spirit) send up fewer seed heads in the first year, can be no till seeded into the field (or thrown on bare patches with some success) and produce a good yield in their first year, making them a great candidate for winter killed fields.

Varieties developed over the past few years are reported to be fast germinating, rapidly growing plants that are more winter and summer hardy than in the past and can compete well with clover, alfalfa and other grasses. Although these varieties are more winter hardy than in the past, trials done in northern VT have shown there is still some die-out after winter, so a plan should be put in place to phase in a new forage crop or rotate the field in the following year or so.

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*(Continued from page 1)*

Another relatively new group of forages that can do well in our climate are called Festuloliums, or a cross between ryegrass and fescue. These forages combine the quality of a ryegrass with the hardiness of a fescue, and can range from being more like a ryegrass to more like a fescue depending on the variety. Festuloliums create good quality forage that can be grazed intensively. They have early spring regrowth and increased survival in harsh winters. Examples of festulolium varieties include Perun, Lofa, Hykor and Spring Green. Once again, these varieties are hardier than in the past, but trials in the region have shown some die-out after winter, especially if there is minimal snow cover like there was this winter. Ultimately these grasses could be good options if the idea is to supplement an alfalfa or grass field that is showing some degree of winter kill and high yield is still desired in the coming summer.

Other potential forages that could be used in winter kill or emergency situations are experimental forages like teff.

This forage has been used minimally here in northern NY so some caution should be exercised, but for farms facing serious winter kill situations in the majority of their fields, it could produce adequate forage quantity and quality to get you back on your feet in the coming year. Teff requires a very firm seed bed, soil temperatures over 60 degrees F, and excellent control of weeds to produce well. It is reported to have good grazability after a first cutting has been taken off and to make decent late first and second cutting hay.

Due to how minimally teff has been used in this area, it would be best to try a test plot before jumping in with both feet. If your fields have experienced greater than 50% winter kill, it may be advisable to plant the field in corn instead of trying to salvage the remaining grass crop with ryegrass, festulolium or teff.

Keep an eye on fields as they start to green up so that stressed or dead patches can be caught and taken care of before it gets too late in the season. An article by Heather Darby and Sid Bosworth of the University of Vermont suggests walking fields in early

spring looking for spots that green up slower than others or have uneven growth patterns. They recommend digging up plants within the field and checking roots to ensure they are white or cream colored and are well anchored to the soil. Brown or yellow roots with a soft texture or alfalfa crowns that have been visually uprooted and discolored are signs that winter kill has occurred.

No one wants to have to deal with a situation in which their fields have been killed out by bad winter weather, but the reality is that some producers may have that exact problem cropping up this spring (no pun intended). Winter killed fields can still produce well this summer if the right varieties and species of grasses are planted, but in the long run, reducing disease and stressors such as alfalfa snout beetle could make a big impact on how much winter kill you see year after year.



#### **Article Quick Reference**

- **Catch winter kill early to avoid low forage yield this summer.**
- **New varieties of ryegrass and festuloliums can provide high yield and good quality forage in their first year after planting.**
- **Check for other plant stressors like snout beetles or brown root rot and take action to avoid winter kill next year.**

# Tracking Performance During the Year – Are We Staying the Same or Getting Better in the Barn?

Kim Skellie, Extension Support Specialist for Pro-Dairy

We all know that monitoring your farm business on a regular basis is a must. The question is what to monitor and how often to track it. The Dairy Profit Monitor is an on-line program that allows farmers or their consultants to input data to create a **one-page report** that monitors the most important monthly operating factors of a dairy farm business. This includes herd health and production, reproduction, milk check analysis, and labor efficiency.

In addition, since feed costs are easily the largest operating cost on a farm, it is analyzed multiple ways. A common question on farms is “did our last ration change benefit us?” or “has the change in forage worked well?” On your farm, is the data available to answer that question easily? This data would include:

1. Feed usage
2. Feed costs
3. Cow numbers
4. Milk production
5. Current milk price as well as use of a fixed milk price

The Dairy Profit Monitor (DPM) tracks this monthly by entering the required information from farm owner’s feed programs and milk checks.

With this data, business owners can compare internally, i.e. “before and after” scenarios of nutrition or other management changes or compare externally to other farms feed costs that are using the DPM.

Through discussion groups, we have found a few of these feed cost calculations and their relationships with each other to be the most interesting and powerful information in the report. They are:

1. Components/cow/day
2. Dry Matter Intake
3. Feed Efficiency (lbs. of fat corrected milk per lb. of dry matter intake)
4. Net Milk Income over Feed Cost (NMIOFC) calculated a couple of different ways

NMI over Purchased Grain Cost is the measure that correlates most highly with farm profitability and is the preferred measure to track progress of the feeding program. Volume of feed consumed times the cost of the grains, subtracted from the resulting

production from that feed program, determine the final outcome of NMI over Purchased Grain Costs.

Milk prices of 2009 certainly made this calculation a depressing one to track as it trended down. The change in milk price also made it challenging to determine if management and feed changes were beneficial. Dairy owners were forced to scrutinize their feed programs like never before, resulting in significant feed cost cutting on some dairies. But did those changes result in better margins? To help measure these changes, the DPM also uses a fixed milk price calculation when measuring NMIOFC. This price is a three year average which is changed in the DPM system once per year. It allows farmers to make changes and measure them



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without blurring effects of the milk price change.

Some discussion group's fall meetings revolved around the data derived from the DPM comparing July-Sept 08 results to July-Sept 09 results. Participants could see the progress some members made with their feed programs by looking at the Fixed Price NMIOFC calculations. One farm's results showed an increase of 4 lbs. FCM while

decreasing DMI 3 lbs. This resulted in a feed efficiency change from 1.48 to 1.66. These results parlayed to an increase in the Fixed Price NMI over Purchased Grain Costs of \$50/cow/month.

In addition to the previously mentioned feed cost measurements, several other measures were brought out. Milk price discussions focused on the Net Marketing Margin, a measure of non-fixed portions of the milk price. Labor efficiency

improvements were largely forced due to economics. Cull rates and their correlation to milk price were discussed. These meetings were largely unstructured as the data results and participants take the topics in the direction they preferred. To learn more about the Dairy Profit Monitor, go to the website

[www.dairyprofit.cornell.edu](http://www.dairyprofit.cornell.edu)  
and/or contact Kim Skellie at [kss54@cornell.edu](mailto:kss54@cornell.edu) or 607-592-6222.

## Herd Health Classes a Valuable Experience

Emily Myers, CCE Regional Dairy Specialist

This month we finished up the seven class Herd Health module of the Northern NY Dairy Institute in both Franklin and Clinton Counties. In both counties we had good attendance ranging from 6-12 participants depending on the class. As with the dairy cattle reproduction class held last fall, participants in the herd health class came from a wide range of farm sizes and management styles.

Many participants had some previous knowledge of the material that was covered, but still found the classes to be a great overall review. Participants also reported that they learned something new in each class, and had gained knowledge and skills that they could take back and use on the



Rick Grant of Miner Institute and Chris Hill of Poulin Grain discuss cow comfort with class participants while visiting Adirondack Dairy.

would also like to thank the many industry professionals and veterinarians who took time out of their busy day to come speak with us. Your expertise made these classes current, progressive and up to date, thank you again.

As promised, next fall after corn harvest we plan on holding another series of classes on dairy nutrition. We hope to see you all there!

farm.

We would like to say thank you to our host farms: Teteault's, Dimock's, Adirondack Farm, the Trainer's, Aaron Stauffer's, and Dan Meier's Dairy. We truly appreciate the opportunity to get on farm for these classes and learn through hands-on experiences. We



Laura Klaiber, a participant in the mammary gland class, learned about teat and mammary structure and mastitis pathogens.