Thoughts on Winter Feeding
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Even though fall has barely felt like fall this year, it is time to begin thinking about winter feeding. Soon the pastures will stop growing, and stored forage will need to be fed to cows for a few months. A concern that some organic dairy farmers have expressed is the high cost of organic grain right now. What can you do that will help keep the cost as low as possible?

Forage testing is one place to start, for a couple of reasons. First, it will help you determine how much forage your cows can eat, based on the fiber levels. If your cows can eat a higher forage diet, you can feed a lower rate of grain. Second, it will give you an idea of how much protein is in your forage, and from there you can determine how much protein you want or need to buy. Last, it will give you an estimate of how much energy you might need to supplement. Unfortunately, forage analysis is one of those tasks that either isn’t on the priority list, or is done infrequently on many farms. However, it has the potential to bring better returns than you would expect.

The cost to have your forages tested should be less than $20 per sample, unless you decide to have additional nutrients analyzed that are not part of a “standard” analysis package. The most important forages to sample are those that will be fed to your milking cows, and those should be the forages you think will be the highest in quality. This may mean conducting an inventory of everything you have stored on the farm first, and then identifying where your sampling will pay back the most.

When you sample your forages, make sure it is a representative sample. This means sampling from more than one round bale, bale of baleage, or small square bale if you are having these types of forages tested, and then mixing and subsampling. Likewise, if you use an upright or bunker silo for fermented feeds, you should take a bigger sample as it is being fed out, and then mix and subsample to obtain a representative sample.

Since many organic dairies don’t utilize the services of a nutritionist, the information from the forage tests can help you to formulate a basic ration based on a few key nutrients. Although it is still a good idea to make sure your ration is balanced for many other nutrients, you can be generally correct by running through the following types of calculations. It can also be helpful for planning and pricing anything you may need to consider buying.

Once you have the results back, the first two nutrients

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The bottom line to all this thinking and calculating is that if you want to minimize your grain costs this winter, you should sample your forages now to determine what you have to work with.