Strategies for Grazing Beef Cattle on Corn Stalks

Eric Mousel, University of Minnesota

Grazing beef cattle on corn stalks can offset a large portion of feeding more expensive roughage diets over the winter. There are management strategies available to help maximize efficient use of stalks and achieve cattle performance goals.

Stocking Rates. Some key questions producers face concerning corn stalks are 'how much total grazable material is out there' and 'how much actual corn is available?' For each bushel of corn harvested, you can anticipate ~16 lbs of leaf and husk which constitutes the vast majority of grazable material. There is a tremendous amount of stalk left as well, however, stalk intake is variable and depends on the class of cattle grazing. One really handy tool I have found to help figure out the right stocking rate for stalk grazing is *The Corn Stalk Grazing Calculator* (beef.unl.edu/learning/cornstalkgrazingcalc.shtml) developed at the University of Nebraska. It is an easy to use spreadsheet to estimate, based on cattle size and corn bushel yield, the number of grazing days expected per acre.

Roughage Quality. There is usually <1 bu/ac of ear corn on the ground, unless the field experienced a lot of ear drop. If >10 bu, a management strategy to limit intake will need to be used. Cows eating mostly husk and leaf will consume a diet of 52-55% total digestible nutrients (TDN) and ~5-5.5% crude protein. The following link helps estimate corn grain yield in the field post-harvest and strategies to reduce corn intake by cattle (beef.unl.edu/estimating-bushels-corn-ground-counting-ears-prior-grazing-cattle).

As the corn plant matures, forage quality deteriorates depending on weather conditions. Cool, dry weather in the fall and winter will maintain quality longer; while wet, warm, and muddy conditions will result in faster deterioration of leaves and husks. Cattle will select grain and best-quality forage first, but with continued grazing, diet quality goes down significantly.

Nutrition Supplementation. It will be important to identify cattle class and performance objective. Mature, dry cows will maintain body weight, and even may gain weight, on corn stalks when grain, husks, and leaves are available. Other cattle classes may require protein and/or energy supplementation to meet desired performance levels. First-calf heifers 90 days prior to calving will need supplementation to meet nutrient requirements when grazing corn stalks. Feeding ~4 lbs/head/day of dried distillers grains would meet this need. Although not common in Minnesota, weaned calves grazing corn stalks with a targeted gain of 1 lb/day will need to be fed an energy and protein supplement. Research has demonstrated dried distillers grains fed at ~2 lbs/head/day when calves are grazing corn stalks will usually meet this targeted level of gain.

It is important to recognize any cattle class grazing only corn stalks with little access to good-quality grass or hay will likely need supplemented Vitamin A. It is best to consult a nutritionist to determine the correct amount and delivery method. Access to a consistent and clean water source is of utmost importance, particularly when grazing a low-quality roughage like corn stalks to stimulate intake, maintain rumen kinetics, and avoid compaction issues.

Bad Weather. Deep snow and ice glazes we tend to get in November are a real problem for stalk grazing since all of the grazable material is lying flat on the ground – have a plan of what you are going to do when those events occur. Similarly, you need a plan if water sources freeze solid; implement the plan quickly when needed.