

## **Building forage inventories amid high input costs**

Joe Lawrence and Kirsten Workman

Following the challenging weather of the 2025 growing season, many dairy farms are facing tight forage inventories and looking to 2026 to rebuild forage supplies. The current economic conditions of escalating input costs and tight milk prices increase the difficulty of accomplishing this goal. Despite all of this, farms can still look for the best practices to achieve their forage inventory goals.

### **Crop nutrition – Find the balance**

Even in times of tight margins, providing adequate crop nutrients to optimize production leads to the best outcomes. There are several fixed costs in crop production that need to be covered regardless of yield. Optimizing yield is the most effective way to distribute these costs. However, there is always a point of diminishing return with nutrient inputs. Yield response trials provide our best source of information for nutrient inputs. Cornell guidelines for major crop nutrients are based on yield response trials.

- Utilize up to date soil test and [nutrient guidelines](#) based on yield response trials to determine fertilizer needs.
- Avoid the temptation to under fertilize while also properly crediting all sources of nutrients for the 2026 crop.
  - [Understand the value of manure.](#)
    - Credit Nitrogen (N) from current and *past* applications.
    - Conserve ammonium-N by incorporating or injecting manure and applying it as close to planting or even during the growing season when possible.
    - Manure Phosphorous (P) and Potassium (K) are immediately available to 2026 crop.
    - Manure is full of micronutrients.
  - Credit N from all sources.
    - Nitrogen credits from the soil, crop rotations, cover crops and manure should all be credited towards meeting 2026 crop needs.
  - Look to the soil bank for P&K.



- Mining nutrients from the soil is not a sustainable long-term practice; however, it can be a tool to utilize selectively in years such as this.
- Meeting the N needs of grasses (including corn) will pay, even at high N fertilizer prices. Manure can also meet that N demand.
- Enhanced-efficiency nitrogen fertilizers can be a useful tool to protect against losses, but be sure you [choose the right one for your situation](#).

## **Forage management – Preserve what you grow**

The goal of forage production is not how many tons per acre are removed from a field, it is how many tons of nutrients are available to the cow at feed out. This concept needs to be *front and center* when developing your strategy for rebuilding inventories.

- Understand current forage inventories to properly set inventory goals and match acreage needs to achieve these goals.
- [Critically evaluate the role of grain acres](#).
  - Assure you are properly meeting forage needs before even considering grain.
  - Understand true cost of production for homegrown grains versus purchased feed cost.
- Avoid the temptation to maximize yield over quality in the field.
  - High yields of lower quality forages are counterproductive to building effective forage inventories.
- [Prioritize a successful first cutting](#).
- Harvest forage crops at the proper maturity and dry matter (DM) to optimize quality and limit shrink losses.
- Focus on [storage management](#) to limit losses in quantity and nutritive value during the storage process.
- [Store feed by quality](#) to optimize use for animal groups with differing nutritional requirements.
- Consider harvesting some of your [winter cover crops as forage](#) if this can be done without forfeiting the successful first cut of hay crops or planting of corn and you have the ability to harvest and store it to optimize its use for targeted animal groups on your farm.

Every cropping season brings its challenges, and 2026 will be no different. Building high quality forage inventories is always the right goal for dairy farms. Using tried and true approaches to maximize homegrown forages will be the best strategy to achieve this goal without breaking the bank.

## **Additional resources**

- [Spring 2022 Fertility Considerations](#)
- [Maximize fertilizer use efficiency for peak fertilizer prices of 2022](#)