

Shawano County Producers Hoping for a Good Year

Jamie Patton, UW-Extension

The 2014 growing season was a challenge and its issues are still plaguing many farmers across the area. “We’re just hoping it is going to be a normal year, whatever “normal” is,” quipped Dave Henselin, President of the Shawano County Forage Council. “It’s early, but normal isn’t looking likely.” A wet 2014 spring and fall, coupled with a cool growing season, hampered corn dry down. Many corn acres intended for grain early in the season were still running 30-40% moisture or higher in mid-October. Many of these intended grain acres were harvested as silage or high moisture corn. However, a significant early November snow brought harvesting to a halt, leaving an estimated 40% corn acres across the county still standing as of mid-December. Surveying the county this spring, approximately 5% of the acres are still not harvested. Kellie Zahn, Shawano County Forage Council board member and member of Behnke Farms of Clintonville, WI, works as a commercial agronomist in the county. “Many farmers are feeling a little anxious. Some have crops still in the field, some are dealing with some soil compaction issues after our wet fall, and the continued soggy soil conditions are complicating manure applications. All that and the forecasted low milk prices are going to make for an interesting year.” Even with the challenges, Dale Mielke of Mielke S-Curve Dairy of Marion, WI, is optimistic. “On the bright side, this past winter wasn’t half as cold as the winter of 2014. We didn’t have much snow cover, but first indications are that the alfalfa is still alive. That’s a good sign,” he chuckles.

In addition to changing weather and field conditions, Shawano County farmers are also working to educate themselves about new roadway legislation. Last year’s passage of Wisconsin Act 377, clarified the definitions of ‘Implements of Husbandry’ and ‘Agriculture Commercial Motor Vehicles,’ as well as established new weight and length limits for these vehicles. The Act, which becomes effective April 24th, also established the procedure to apply for no fee permits to operate large and/or heavy machinery legally on Wisconsin roadways. While a majority of farm equipment in the county meets the new requirements, some does not. “Since the beginning of the year, farms have been weighing their equipment,” Henselin states. “Depending on the capacity, many of our manure tankers, when full, may need a permit to operate on the road. Farmers want to know, so they can get the necessary paperwork out of the way early.”

When it comes to forage, corn silage is still king in Shawano County, with just shy of 30,000 acres dedicated to silage production annually. Average production across the county is estimated at 19 tons/ac. However, like any average, 19 tons does not tell the whole story. Silage yields in the less rocky, less rolling areas on the eastern side of the county can average 25 tons or more in a good year. The much rockier and sandier soils of the west can experience wide yield fluctuations depending on the amount and timing of rain in any given year. This wide variation in yield potential and consistency is reflected in average cash cropland rental rates. A survey of self-reported 2015 land rental rates by Shawano County UW-Extension found farmers are paying on average approximately \$60/ac for cropland in the west and \$110/ac in the east. Average corn grain yields were self-reported as approximately 130 bushels/ac in the west and 155 bushels/ac in the east.

Even with an increased emphasis on corn silage in dairy rations, alfalfa is still a forage mainstay. Approximately 20,000 acres of dry alfalfa hay are harvested in the county each year, with many additional acres harvested as haylage. Many of the county’s alfalfa stands are in their second year of production, as winterkill decimated close to 50% of fields during the 2012-2013 winter. County annual alfalfa yields average close to 4 tons/ac, with most farmers harvesting four crops per season. Managing soil fertility in the county’s sandy, low organic matter soils is key to maintaining high yields and stand longevity. Research from around Wisconsin has established the need for maintaining adequate fertility, particularly soil potassium and sulfur levels. Darryll Olson, owner of May-Do Farms near Navarino, WI, takes a proactive approach to maintaining adequate fertility levels. “In addition to soil testing, I fertilize my alfalfa with potassium, sulfur, and boron after the second crop and with additional potassium after the fourth crop. This seems to help with increasing productivity and reducing winterkill.”

This coming year, Shawano County Forage Council members will be assisting UW with various forage research trials. “In the past, we have helped with corn silage variety trials. This year, we are going to help the University with evaluating the optimal seeding rate for alfalfa in northeast Wisconsin,” states Behnke. “Many farmers are seeding 15 lbs/ac. We are going to see if we can achieve the same stand and same forage yield by reducing the seeding rate to 12 lbs. Three pounds of seed doesn’t sound like much, but the potential input cost savings for an individual farmer could be significant.”



Kellie Zahn and Doug Behnke.



Wet conditions complicate manure applications.



Darryll Olson