Utilizing crop residue for your cowherd

One of the most expensive times for beef producers with a cowherd is during the fall and winter for feed costs. To lower these costs, producers extend the grazing season by using crop residue in the fields. Hello, this is Sandra Wick, Crop Production Agent with Post Rock District of KSRE. Kansas is very fortunate to have abundant crop fields with residue that can be utilized for cowherds. Since there are a few more weeks of grazing, stay tuned and I will share some guidelines to remember.

Weather can be the most important factor in successfully grazing crop residue. Snow cover can reduce or eliminate access to crop residue. Mud may make grazing difficult and may result in decreased performance and greater waste of forage due to trampling. Corn or milo stalk fields grazed shortly after harvest are higher in nutrient content than fields grazed 60 days after harvest. This indicates that there is some weathering loss of nutrients. The greatest nutrient loss appears in the husk and leaf and the loss is primarily a loss in energy content. A key management component towards the end of the grazing is supplementation. Cows generally eat the leaves, husks and the grain, not the stalks, unless you leave them out too long. About 50% of the residue is the leaves, husks and grain with the other half being stems and stalks.

There is probably a mix of different cattle out on the residue with predominately bred cows that are in mid-gestation of carrying that calf. Be sure and watch the condition, of your cowherd, and it would be a great idea to quickly take a body condition score on your cows. Evaluate your cowherd and identify thin ones that might need to add a little weight. A great way to accomplish this is to feed a couple lbs./head/day of a protein supplement like cubes or some good hay or alfalfa pellets.

Water is another key component of grazing crop residue. Make sure their water supply is adequate. A 1500 lb. cow needs about 10-12 gallons/day at about 40 degrees F.

Even though crop residue is a great feed resource, it does take a little more management especially if nitrates were indicated from a prior test before the cows were turned out. If higher levels of nitrates were indicated in your crop residue, just remember that the husks, leaves and grain are the least with the highest nitrate accumulators the stalks and stems. So watch the grazing pattern and don’t let them graze or grub the stalks to the ground. It is also a good idea to watch the cattle behavior closely and pull them off if you notice any unusual behavior. Lastly, be sure and check your fences, whether it be permanent fence or electric fence. They have been out on the stalks for a while and might try to test your fences.

Despite some limitations, residue grazing has become an integral part of many cattle operations, primarily as a feed resource for maintaining the breeding herd during the winter. For more details and guidelines on utilizing crop residue go to our website at www.postrock.ksu.edu/livestock. For more information on “Utilizing crop residue for your cowherd,” stop by or call any of our Post Rock Extension District Offices in Beloit, Lincoln, Mankato, Osborne or Smith Center.