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Cover Crops as Cattle Feed
By Gene Schmitz, MU Extension Livestock Specialist

In recent years, many farmers have planted cover crops in corn and soybean fields. Some have harvested the cover crop the following spring for hay or haylage to use as cattle feed.

I have received nutrient analysis test results on some of this forage harvested in the spring of 2013. I want to focus on samples of cereal rye. While the number of samples is not large, the results seem to be consistent from various locations across central Missouri.

For cereal rye hay or haylage, average total digestible nutrients (TDN) is 49.5%, average net energy for maintenance (NEm) is .39, and average crude protein (CP) is 6.3%. Contrast these results with averages for the 2013 grass hay crop. Average TDN is 56.1%, average NEm is .49, and average CP is 8.9%. Obviously the cereal rye hay or haylage is of lower quality than much of the grass hay.

What does this mean in terms of feeding beef cows? The grass hay is averaging a bit low in energy for a beef cow in late gestation. This deficit in energy can be met by feeding 1 pound of corn grain per head per day. Protein content is generally adequate for most grass hay samples I have received to date.

Cereal rye hay or haylage, on the other hand, requires significantly more energy and protein supplementation in order to meet the nutrient requirements of a gestating beef cow. It takes approximately 3.5 pounds per head per day of dried distiller's grains (DDG) plus the cereal rye forage to meet the cow's energy needs. This level of DDG supplementation will meet the CP needs of the cow.

Why the difference in quality between the cereal rye and traditional grass hay? Due to weather conditions last spring, it was difficult, if not impossible, to harvest the rye cover crop at peak nutritional levels. The rye matured and lost feed value before it could be harvested as hay or haylage.

If producers have cereal rye hay, cereal rye haylage, or annual ryegrass hay or haylage that will be fed this winter, it is critical to test the forage. It is likely to be very short in energy and protein, and these nutrients will need to be supplemented or animal performance will suffer dramatically.

If assistance is needed with collecting forage samples, interpreting forage test results, or developing a feeding program based on forage tests, contact me at the Extension Center in Warsaw at (660) 438-5012 or by e-mail at schmitze@missouri.edu. University of Missouri Extension is an equal opportunity / ADA institution.