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Corn Silage, Alfalfa Hay, and the Dairyman

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Dairymen must depend on their abilities as crops and soils men to produce the necessary quantities of high-quality feed required to maintain a productive, profitable herd. In this capacity, they have adopted the use of corn silage to such a degree that it has truly become "King of Forages" in Virginia.

Table 1 indicates the steady increase in corn silage since 1955. Note the relationship of corn silage yields per acre and acreage harvested each year. If moisture is not greatly limiting, yields per acre go up. Since the farmer does not need to cut as much of his corn acreage to meet his feed needs, he allows more of it to mature for grain. In a dry year the reverse occurs. The most accurate picture of the use of corn silage each year is the tonnage produced.

Production of alfalfa, the ideal partner for corn silage, was really swinging into high gear in 1960 and 1961. Its acreage reached a new high and improved management pushed the average yield for the state to 2.8 tons in 1961, shown in Table 1. Then the alfalfa weevil invaded.

When previously effective weevil control practices failed, farmers had to rely upon costlier, more difficult measures that gave only partial control under farm practice. However, the development of varieties such as TEAM which have some tolerance to the alfalfa weevil has given farmers encouragement in seeding alfalfa again. Many dairymen tried other hay crops, but after finding none that could match the quality and yield of alfalfa, have returned to alfalfa. It is expected that the alfalfa acreage will continue to increase each year if further problems do not develop.

TABLE 1. Acreage, Yields Per Acre, and Total Annual Production of Corn Silage And Alfalfa Hay in Virginia

Year	CORN SILAGE			ALFALFA HAY		
	Acres (000)	Yield/A (tons)	Total Prod. (1000 tons)	Acres (000)	Yield/A (tons)	Total Prod. (1000 tons)
1955	86	10.0	860	226	2.4	531
1957	95	7.5	712	258	2.2	555
1959	96	11.0	1056	263	2.5	644
1961	94	13.0	1222	260	2.8	728
1963	252	8.5	2142	225	1.3	292
1965	173	13.0	2249	171	2.3	385
1967	176	14.0	2464	82	2.2	180
1969	165	15.0	2475	90	2.5	225

For maximum economic yield, the productivity of soil and crop must be matched as closely as possible. Corn is the highest yielding forage available and, for greatest economic return, it must be grown on the best corn soils. On soils where erosion is not a problem, corn can be grown continuously.

The practices of sod planting and minimum tillage are becoming more widely used and encourage continuous corn by reducing erosion and conserving moisture. They also allow sloping soils to be planted in corn which would normally not be suited for corn due to erosion problems.

On many farms, corn and alfalfa make an ideal team. Good corn soils with too much slope for continuous corn will produce high yields of quality forage when used in a corn-alfalfa rotation. Many additional soils in the state are marginal for corn production but are well adapted to alfalfa.

If properly fertilized and managed, alfalfa produces more high-quality feed than any other perennial forage grown in the state. Dairymen need to take advantage of its high digestible protein content (10.5% for hay) in relation to corn silage (1.5% as fed). The total cost of purchased supplements can be drastically reduced by including alfalfa with corn silage in the forage program.

Energy is the prime requirement of livestock and dairy rations. Energy production on a limited acreage suited for cropping is a major limiting factor in the efficiency and expansion of many dairy operations. Alfalfa is generally not able to compete successfully with corn for our top corn soils on the basis of potential energy production per acre. Most good farmers in the state can average 17 to 20 tons of corn silage per acre. Producing the 6 to 7 tons per acre of alfalfa needed to equal the amount of energy produced by this corn silage level has been more difficult, but certainly can be done.

Table 2 points out the cost advantage corn silage enjoys over other Virginia forages in TDN production. At 21 tons per acre, which progressive farmers can average, energy from corn silage is much cheaper than energy from alfalfa hay yielding 5.8 tons per acre.

But when both protein and energy in each forage are considered in terms of their dollar replacement value in the ration, alfalfa can compete as long as it is used to meet protein requirements in the ration. On this basis, it takes about 20 tons of corn silage to equal 4.8 tons of alfalfa.

These data also show that high yields must be maintained to ensure low costs per 100 lbs. TDN and greater profits per acre. This is generally true for all crops, but the Virginia farmer today is able to achieve this desirable profit-making situation more easily with corn silage than any other forage. The position of alfalfa will continue to be strengthened as improved varieties, more efficient harvesting and handling, reliable insect control, and other management improvements are applied.

TABLE 2. Cost of Each 100 lbs. of TDN Produced by Several Forages at Various Yield Levels

	<u>Yield (T/A)</u>	<u>Utilized TDN/A (lbs.)</u>	<u>Cost/100# TDN as fed</u>
Corn silage.....	15	5940	1.90
	21	9450	1.44
Sorghum-sudan silage.....	12	2868	2.93
	17	4162	2.42
Alfalfa hay.....	3.8	3275	2.60
	4.8	4350	2.36
	5.8	5298	2.18
Red clover hay.....	2.3	1935	2.94
	3.5	3010	2.27
16% dairy concentrate @ \$3.50...		1400/T	5.36

Increase in production and use of corn silage has been accompanied by a corresponding improvement in quality as measured by the increased dry matter and TDN percentages, shown in Table 3. In the early years of corn silage feeding, around 27% dry matter was the goal for high quality silage. Research and practical experience soon indicated that higher yields, improved palatability, greater animal consumption, and lower storage losses are obtained if the crop is not harvested until it reaches the 35 to 42% dry matter present at the hard dough stage of maturity. At this stage of maturity, the husks and lower leaves are brown and the grain is well dented.

TABLE 3. Changes in Virginia Corn Silage As-Fed Quality*

	<u>1963</u>	<u>1965</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1968</u>
% Dry matter.....	29.2	33.6	34.6	36.6
% Total digestible nutrients..	19.6	22.8	23.2	24.3

*Based on annual V.P.I. forage test averages.

The willingness of farmers to wait longer before harvesting has been the major factor in improving corn silage quality. Improved harvesting and storage procedures have also played significant roles.

Farmers have become more aware of maintaining sharp cutting edges on their field chopper knives and shear bars, adjusting clearance on cutter knives to chop silage into 1/4 to 3/8" lengths, and packing properly to maintain desirable conditions for fermentation processes.

High quality corn silage contains large amounts of grain, so varieties that are high grain producers are also the better varieties for silage.

Another factor involved in improved silage quality is the V.P.I. Forage Testing Service, initiated in 1962. This service has shown forage producers how management drastically affects quality as well as amounts of forage produced. By measuring the quality of their forage, it also helps them determine the amounts of feed needed to balance feeding rations.

Table 4 shows how the trends in alfalfa and corn silage production changed the feeding patterns in Virginia dairy herds. Each year, corn silage has made up a greater portion of rations at the expense of hay.

TABLE 4. Changes in Average Amounts of Feed Annually per Cow in Virginia D.H.I.A. Herds*

	<u>1955</u>	<u>1959</u>	<u>1963</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1969</u>
Corn silage (tons).....	3.1	3.9	6.2	7.6	8.0
Hay (tons).....	1.6	1.8	1.5	0.9	0.7
Grain (tons).....	1.4	1.6	2.1	2.3	2.4

*Approximately 55,000 cows each year.

As weevil problems caused alfalfa to decline, dairymen depended more on supplements to supply the additional protein in the ration rather than switch to alternate hay crops such as red clover.

The requirement for high energy production has made corn silage the "King" of their forage programs. At present, "Queen Alfalfa" is still at a relatively low ebb due to past problems in controlling the alfalfa weevil. However, she is making a come-back and continues to be an ideal partner for corn silage from the agronomic, economic, and feeding viewpoints.