



Don't cut corners as potential returns are too great

ENSURE and insure sound about the same; however, these terms are quite different. The term ensure means to guarantee or make certain. It seems the only thing we can ensure in 2022 is volatility.

Alternatively, insure means to protect against a negative outcome. One can purchase insurance and establish a financial shield to lessen the negative economic impact associated with an unexpected accident or catastrophic outcome. Insurance applies to many different situations and assets, including crops.

Merge ensure and insure

In light of volatile markets as of late, I contend that we should merge the terms "ensure" and "insure" into the same train of thought with your forage plan for 2022.

This year has brought incredible uncertainty through geopolitical conflict and inflation. The latter has greatly impacted chemical and commodity prices. While input costs such as seed, chemical, fertilizer, and feed are up, the margin potential for crop and dairy farmers in 2022 may be among the best we've experienced in recent years. Many producers are keenly aware of the sizable margin opportunities ahead.

Case in point, in a recent phone conversation with a business-minded dairy producer while en route to give an invited talk, he stressed to me something to the effect of, "Tell the audience not to cut corners with their crop inputs this year, the potential returns are too great!" I shared this message with the audience later that day, and the discussion around this

concept was fascinating.

The inflated input costs were on everyone's mind, although, the projected returns this fall were not. Hopefully, this is not a year to bank on insurance against economic failure, but instead we should think of agronomic inputs as insurance. In turn, your farm needs to ensure the growing crop has all that it needs to achieve its full potential and a positive economic return.

Fertilizer is like insurance

Through the first half of 2022, a common discussion thread in agronomic conversations and meetings has been crop input and chemical costs. As this magazine hits your mailbox, the crops are in the ground and many agronomic decisions have been made. Unfortunately, some growers may have cut back on early season inputs such as fertilizer. Thankfully, there is still much of the season yet to play out, and your farm can capture upside economic potential associated with in-season nutrient and crop protection applications. With these insurance-like investments, you put your crop in position to succeed.

Crop nutrition and crop protection are generally recognized to positively impact forage yield. The supplemental nutrition and crop protection impact on forage quality is not as clear. I've spent time surveying published soil and agronomy research to better understand how we can positively influence forage quality, to little avail.

Higher seeding rates and plant populations in corn can negatively impact corn silage quality, but we

have little understanding of how soil fertility or nutrition relates to forage quality. Similar to how adequate macro and trace-mineral fortification in dairy diets are recognized to improve health, reproductive performance, transition cow health, and milk production potential, there must be relationships between soil and plant nutrition and forage quality. We just don't know conclusively what these relationships are yet. In years to come, this will change.

In collaborative efforts with a couple of agronomy and nutrition teams, we're taking on field projects to develop a better understanding of how agronomic inputs can impact forage quality. For example, Kristen Felton, myself, and others are presenting research findings at the 2022 American Dairy Science Association conference detailing correlations between soil and plant tissue minerals and forage quality.

Trust me, providing your crop with adequate nutrition will put the crop in position to succeed, just like providing your transition cows everything they need. On the flip side, while cutting back on N and other expensive inputs may save some cost, it will also ensure the crop cannot succeed to its full genetic potential.

On the crop protection side, we can lean on research exploring fungicide application impact on quality and anti-nutritional components thanks to Phil Cardoso, Damon Smith, and others. These researchers are investigating how crop protection can impact forage yield, quality, and mold or mycotoxin contamination. We know the right crop protection

around tasseling (VT) can lessen anti-nutritional factors in silage, such as vomitoxin.

Along these lines, with a cooler and wet spring for many dairy forage growers this year, we may be setting up for greater ear and stalk rot potential as the season continues. Consult with your agronomist and monitor crop health closely. If disease pressure does come in, the added insurance-like investment in crop protection will seem like mere pennies.

Inputs are like insurance

Coming back to the idea of merging ensure and insure into the same train of thought, think of crop inputs as insurance this year. If your forage crops are shorted due to higher input costs and not afforded the full opportunity to succeed, the only thing we have ensured is that we may have saved a bit on cost but the maximum economic return per acre is no longer possible.

In the words of the business-minded dairy producer, do not shortchange your crops because the economic potential associated with optimum yield and quality is too great. With projected grain and feed prices this fall, these are risks your dairy can't afford to take. 🐄

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