by John Goeser

Today's machines might not be built for this year's corn

MID-SEASON has turned into the late season as we're nearing corn silage harvest. We're in a position to execute our plans, having made necessary mid-season adjustments. Even though we have set up our farm fields for success, there are still adjustments to be made this time of year. Think of these adjustments like the late-season playoff push, pulling in all available resources to get the team over the finish line and into the playoffs.

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Players on the team include your agronomist, nutritionist, and last but not least — the harvest crew. Jon Orr of Orrson Custom Harvesting helped remind me of the harvest crew's importance in a phone call a few weeks back — more on this shortly.

This article is no motivational post; it's an urgent push for cohesion among team members, recognizing the past two corn crops for silage have been different. This year stands to follow suit. Everyone needs to come together in optimizing the 2023 corn silage potential.

Control what you can

Prior to delving into control points this year, remind yourself that there are numerous factors well outside of our management and control. Following a 180-degree flip in rainfall and water availability for many across the U.S. when compared to last season, this year's outcome will be different in some regards. Rather than fret about the unexpected, we have to focus on managing what we can control and try to cast our anxiety elsewhere. Please take this to heart. The stress and emotions tied in with harvest can bear a heavy burden on the mind and body.

Resetting our sights on things we can control, let's start with the realization that corn for silage is different today relative to what we chopped five or 10 years ago. My conversation with Orr affirmed and challenged my thoughts here.

Chopping green corn

We need to give farmers down in Florida and Georgia a bit of recognition. In the January 10, 2023, article titled, "If you short crops, you will short your cows, too," I referenced a conversation with Bruno Do Amaral regarding chopping green corn with more starch for silage in Florida.

The net outcome Do Amaral saw was excellent fiber digestibility and appropriate moisture, but it was coupled with more grain and slightly less digestible starch due to advanced kernel maturity with better plant health and green stalks. To use terms from agronomist Todd Schaumburg, the dry grain is soaking up the moisture in the green stalk. To borrow a phrase from the *Hoard's Dairyman* Editorial Team, corn silage today is "a tricky beast."

Down in Georgia, Orr and producers are experiencing the same thing Do Amaral spoke about with advanced seed genetics and two passes with fungicide. Per Orr, the plants are healthy and green, top to bottom, right up to silage maturity and beyond, so much so that other farmers at the local cafe spread rumors about the crew chopping green corn, insinuating they must be nuts.

But they're not.

I believe many other U.S. farmers are in the same camp and that this is our new normal — wet stalks and dry grain at harvest. Recognizing that corn silage is both a forage and a grain, we're probably realizing a divergence in the forage quality versus the grain quality.

The forage aspect

The mid-season adjustments, such as fungicides or other agronomic amendments, have been made to optimize crop potential. At this point, our goal is harvesting the potential and not mucking it up.

Monitor for ear and stalk rots and leaf diseases such as tar spot. For those dealing with severe drought, limited ear fill, or barren plants, we'll need to address management decisions in real-time. For those with more normal corn plant and kernel maturation, take records of both whole-plant moisture and kernel maturity as your crew monitors corn and stages fields. Ultimately, whole-plant moisture will be the final deciding factor to go time, but prepare to find advanced kernel maturity with wet stalks where water and plant health are excellent.

The grain aspect

Building upon the advanced kernel maturity comment above, this is a major take-home point to manage this year through kernel processing. The divergence between advanced kernel maturity and stalk moisture or the corn plant's visual appearance is not to be taken lightly. For example, Orr's crew is seeing near black-layer corn in some fields despite green stalks from top to bottom. And paraphrasing one of Orr's colorful quotes, he stated, "This corn is [hard] to process."

We talked about the factors contributing to difficult kernel processing, recognizing there are likely some factors beyond the kernel. With that being said, Orr then made another comment that resonated with me: "Today's machines weren't built for this."

I hadn't thought about how the green plant with black-layer kernels impacts the interaction with the latest machinery and engineering; however, Orr has likely got a good point.

Self-propelled forage harvesters and kernel processors have evolved over the past 15 years. If corn is as different as we've portrayed here over the past few years, then it would stand to reason that the choppers will need to adapt. This won't happen in a single year.

Closing in on the critical control point for the 2023 corn harvest for silage, stay on top of your kernel processing. Regardless of where your kernel maturity lands with whole-plant moistures at 65%, destroy the kernels. There's no financial room for corn passing through dairy cows, and 75% to 80% kernel processing scores at feed out will put your cows in a position to succeed.

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