

Why corn silage matters to Dairy Farmers



Corn silage is a cornerstone crop for dairy farms because it provides a high-energy, digestible forage that supports milk production and herd health. Its ability to deliver consistent nutrition—especially in the form of fermentable carbohydrates and fiber—makes it a reliable feed source throughout the year.

Forage quality directly impacts milk yield, and corn silage offers a balance of starch and fiber that complements other feed components. It's also efficient to grow and harvest, making it a cost-effective option for many operations. Proper management of corn silage—from planting to harvest to storage—is essential to maximize its value and minimize losses.

Our burndown clinics are designed to help producers develop a harvest plan based on field maturity. We had an extended planting season making this year's crop highly variable not only between fields but even



within field. We had weather challenges all season from too wet at planting, to severe storms that damaged corn with hail, to several weeks of dry weather potentially impacting pollination and overall yield. We accumulated a lot of growing degree days this summer. We had several "heat waves" defined as a minimum of 3 days over 90 degrees. In late September we are finding crop moistures from too wet to too dry which vary with time of planting, hybrid maturity and planting dates.

In a year like this the support from us to determine whole plant dry matter is critical for developing a harvest plan. The corn silage crop will make up 50% or more of the diet for the next 9-12 months. Proper planning ensures that the crop is harvested at **peak biomass and energy content**.

Why Planning Corn Silage Harvest Matters

1. Maximizing Nutritional Value

- **Harvest timing** directly affects starch content, fiber digestibility, and overall feed quality.
- Ideal harvest occurs when the whole plant moisture is around **65–70%** for bunker silos (or **62–68%** for upright silos).

Delayed harvest can lead to **excessively dry silage**, reducing fermentation quality and palatability.

3. Efficient Use of Labor and Equipment

- Coordinating harvest logistics (choppers, wagons, trucks, packing equipment) avoids bottlenecks.
- Helps prevent **downtime, overdrying, or weather-related delays**.

4. Optimizing Fermentation and Storage

- Correct moisture levels are essential for **anaerobic fermentation**, which preserves silage and prevents spoilage.
- Planning helps ensure **uniform chop length** and **adequate packing**, reducing air pockets and spoilage risk.

5. Weather Risk Management

- Monitoring forecasts and field conditions allows for **flexibility** in harvest timing.
- Planning ahead helps mitigate risks from **rain, frost, or heat stress**.

6. Animal Performance

- High-quality silage supports **better milk production, growth rates, and feed efficiency**.
- Poorly timed harvests can lead to **nutritional deficits** and increased feed costs.





Bale Grazing Updates – Summer Data Collection & Prep for Year 2

Betsy Hicks, CCE Regional Dairy Specialist

The three Cortland County farms participating in the USDA CIG Bale Grazing Grant successfully completed their summer grazing seasons. Forage sampling and soil sampling protocols were taken at the beginning and end of the grazing season on each farm, and will be compiled with other farms' data. Farms are now entering their second year of the grant protocol, which includes bale grazing a second winter on a portion of the project area. Two of the farms received in-depth soil reports from the NY Soil Health Initiative, to help them understand their fields more deeply and make better decisions for improving soil health.



Soil Sampling at one farm early this summer. Bale grazing rings can be seen in the foreground.



Brett Chedzoy, CCE Schuyer measures forage using a rising plate meter.



Bale grazing ring of forage in early fall before being grazed.

Farmers bale graze to reduce labor and equipment costs, improve soil fertility by naturally distributing manure and urine, increase forage production, and provide a consistent feed source for livestock, especially during winter. By placing hay bales in a grid pattern and allowing cattle to graze a few at a time, the practice mimics natural grazing, enhances soil health, and can improve cattle health by keeping them cleaner.



Pasture Walks: A Living Laboratory for Learning and Connection

Janice Degni, CCE Regional Field Crop Specialist

On-farm pasture walks offer more than just a scenic stroll—they're immersive, hands-on learning experiences that bring pasture management principles to life. Managed pastures check all the boxes: they support environmental health, foster community goodwill, and make economic sense. With year-round vegetation, biodiversity, and erosion control, pastures are a powerhouse of sustainability. And let's face it—there's something heartwarming about seeing livestock grazing peacefully. It evokes a sense of connection to local agriculture and appreciation for the farmers behind it.

From a production standpoint, pastures are the most cost-effective forage system. Pasture requires more management than feeding stored feeds because the quantity and quality change daily. Animals harvest their own feed, reducing the need for expensive equipment. Each host farm opens its gates to share their unique management strategies—from fencing and watering systems to paddock layout—creating a rich setting for peer-to-peer learning.

This year, we held pasture walks in all six counties, each one offering its own insights and inspiration:

- June – Simme Valley, Cayuga County** We explored the role of genetics in beef herd improvement and the farm's journey of continuous refinement. Adam Murray, Cornell PRO-LIVESTOCK beef specialist, shared insights on calf immunization protocols timed with paddock rotations—an example of strategic health management.
- July – Organic Grass-Fed Dairy, Tioga County** We presented a comparison of the nutrient value of three manure sources used on the farm, revealing their effectiveness relative to commercial fertilizers. A striking demonstration of grazing heights—from 2 to 6 to 8 inches—highlighted the importance of not overgrazing. Grazing too tightly weakens plants and slows regrowth, reducing available forage.
- July – Ironwood Grazing Co.** Mike showcased how mob grazing can suppress undesirable species like knapweed and compared it to mowing. By concentrating animals in a small area, selective grazing is minimized, giving preferred forage species a competitive edge. Mike's approach is especially notable as he leases land and custom grazes beef cows.
- August – Laughing Goat Fiber Farm, Tompkins County** Grazing small ruminants comes with its own set of challenges. The farm uses net fencing within a boundary of woven wire fencing to manage their flock. Jess Waltemeyer, Cornell PRO-LIVESTOCK small ruminant specialist, discussed parasite life cycles and management strategies. Conservation projects supported by Tompkins County Soil and Water included drainage swales, a composting pad, perimeter fencing, waterline that serve the entire grazing system, and tree planting for shade along the western boundary—enhancing both animal welfare and pasture health.
- September – Heavenly Acres, Broome County** Horses are notorious for tight grazing, which can degrade pasture quality. The pasture system for Heavenly acres was designed in consultation with the Broome County Soil and Water Conservation District. The farm practices structured rest periods and nighttime grazing to prevent overuse. Hay supplementation allows paddocks additional rest when needed.
- September – Benjamin Family Farm, Chemung County** The Benjamins highlighted their cattle chute system, which streamlines animal handling. With limited pasture acreage, they supplement with hay and have installed a feeding pad to reduce mud and feed loss. Plans for design improvements are already underway. Meanwhile, the local 4-H group enthusiastically searched for dung beetles.



Each pasture walk wrapped up with snacks and social time—because learning is better when it's shared. These events continue to build community, spark innovation, and strengthen our collective knowledge of pasture-based systems.

Ag Awareness, Youth Education & Outreach

Education and Engagement Initiatives

- Cayuga County 4H workshop – ear tagging, vaccinating & banding, & differences between handling beef & dairy (~8 youth)
- Chemung County Kid's Cow Camp – ear tagging & vaccinations (~15 youth)
- Cortland Agstravaganza – field crops & beef cattle stations (~200 youth)
- Cortland EZ Acres Dairy Farm tour – forage station & freestall stations (~200 youth)
- Cortland Dairy Parade – street lineup
- Tioga County Sundaes on the Farm – butter making (~800 pp)
- Tompkins County Farm Tour w/ Homer 8th graders – nutrition, cow health (~30 youth)
- County Fairs –
 - ◊ Butter Making at Tioga County & Chemung County
 - ◊ Dairy shows at Cortland, Broome, Tioga, Chemung, Cayuga
 - ◊ NYS Fair – Dairy Cattle Birthing Center and Field and Forage Crops Display and Judging

Janice and Betsy supported 13 separate events offering public education and outreach across the SCNY region this summer. These events support local CCE staff in our counties, whether through county fairs, large public open farms days, or smaller hands-on workshops. Youth learned proper ear tagging technique, different types of vaccinations and handling differences between breeds of cattle. Hundreds of tubs of butter were made with the public at fairs. Annual events like Tioga County Sundaes on the Farm and Cortland Agstravaganza and EZ Acres Dairy Farm Tour were supported by the team, and offered opportunities for the public to learn about field crops and forage, beef cattle, and dairy cattle housing.



Cornell Cooperative Extension links the research and extension efforts at **Cornell University**, and **Cornell AgriTech**, the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, **providing the knowledge** to maximize New York State's agricultural and natural resources. The **South Central New York Dairy and Field Crops Program** is a Cornell Cooperative Extension partnership between Cornell University and the CCE Associations in 6 Counties.