

WHAT DAIRY PRODUCERS LOOK FOR IN WINTER FORAGES FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF A CUSTOM CHOPPER

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Danell Brothers have been in the custom chopping business in the Kings-Tulare area for 23 years. We custom chop between 45,000 and 50,000 acres of corn and winter forage every year. In addition to our custom harvesting business, we farm over 6000 acres, and we own and operate two commercial dairies in Kings County. Our many years of experience of custom chopping for local dairy producers, as well as our experience growing silage crops and dairying, gives us a broad perspective of the primary interests dairy producers have regarding winter forage for silage. Benefits of using winter forages for silage include:

- price advantage compared to baled hay
- labor savings
- ease of feeding
- additional tons/acre - total tons

In recent years we have seen shifts in winter forage production from forage blends (i.e. mixes of oats, barley, and wheat with or without vetch, beans or peas) to primarily wheat. The majority of our accounts request winter cereals harvested at the soft dough stage of maturity.

Questions that we feel need better answers with regards to winter forage production are:

- quality (or feeding value) - when is it best and how is it defined?
- optimum time to cut - soft dough stage, or earlier, i.e. boot stage (field wilted)?
- optimum moisture levels for ensiling - what is it? Our experience is that 68% for pit silos and 65% for silage "bags" is best.

Regardless of other issues, total yield (tons/acre) is always the factor that will be the highest priority for most growers and dairymen.

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