Cattle can make good use of harvest residues of such rowcrops as rice, sweet potatoes, milo, corn, sorghum and soybeans, says Dr. Steven S. Nicholson, veterinary toxicologist with the LSU Cooperative Extension Service. But some hazards exist, he adds.

Cattle eating excessive amounts of grains or beans left in the field become acutely ill because of the effects of lactic acid, a product of fermentation. Intoxication from soybean overload produces aggressiveness, muscle tremors and staggering gait and, in most cases, results in death.

Liver-damaging mold toxins, called aflatoxins, may be present in corn and cottonseed. Young calves and pigs are most susceptible.

Sorghum hybrid forages are known for their potential hazards of cyanide and nitrate poisoning. Fortunately, these do not occur often in Louisiana, Nicholson notes.

Regrowth of sorghums, primarily when the forage is dark green and less than 2 ft. tall, poses the greatest risk of cyanide poisoning to grazing ruminants.

Of special concern this fall is sorghum cut for hay during a drought period in June and early July. Drought-stressed sorghum is sometimes cut while immature and contains dangerous amounts of nitrates. Nitrate-nitrite content should be determined by lab tests before feeding.

Another major concern in grazing rowcrop fields is the presence of such toxic weeds as sicklepod, coffeesenna, crotolaria, jimsonweed and nightshades. "Livestock poisoning caused by these plants is not rare, and often affects yearling-age cattle without prior grazing experience with the weeds," Nicholson adds. When stubble is cut for hay, the presence of these weeds may produce poisoning later in the winter.

Outbreaks of emphysema are common in cattle feeding on mold-damaged sweet potatoes. Sweet potato overload causes acute indigestion and a foul-smelling black diarrhea. Amounts of sweet potato fed should be restricted to a few pounds per head over several days to allow the animals to adjust to the new diet.

Exposure to pesticide residues, like organic arsenicals and sodium chlorate, should be avoided, Nicholson adds.

Veterinarians and local LSU Cooperative Extension Service agents can provide further information about specific health problems livestock may have.