How Good is Your Hay?

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All hay that is made or produced should have a value placed on it. Because no matter what livestock enterprise that it is earmarked for, there were significant inputs that went into producing that hay. Therefore, it is imperative that we place a value on the hay product(s) that we have produced.

The only real conclusive way to put a monetary value on the hay is to have it analyzed in a certified laboratory recognized by the National Forage Testing Association. Then, designate that hay for the particular livestock enterprise that is best suited for it.

Now, how do we get to that point? It all starts when a particular field or farm is being designated for hay production. There are several questions that we need to ask when the hay making decisions are being made;

- Is this hay that I am producing for my own livestock?
- Is this hay going to be earmarked for cash hay sales?
- Will this hay fulfill all the stored feed needs I have for the upcoming winter season?
- If cash hay, what markets am I targeting?
- Am I going to do my own marketing or have someone else do it?
- Does the market dictate the package size?
- What type and size equipment do I need?
- Do I have adequate and proper storage?
- If cash hay, who will transport?
- What type of hay shall I produce?

As you can see from this list, many things have to be taken into consideration when making hay. However, just as important as all of these questions are; it is vitally important that we carefully document all inputs from the very beginning of the decision making process. This documentation must be kept from the initial thought “I am going to make hay” all the way through until we document its “sale price” either as a cash hay sale or through our own livestock enterprise.

Once we know what all of our input costs are, we can then begin to place a monetary value on the hay. We really don’t want to “sale” our hay for a loss so
a fair market value should be placed on the hay. That’s fairly easy to do in the cash hay market. The cash hay is pretty much driven by supply and demand. You have various tools at your disposal to gauge the current cash hay market.

Word of mouth
Auction quotes
Internet
Local broker
Magazines and newspapers
Producer Meetings

Now comes the trickier part. How do you put a value (how good is my hay?) on hay that you feed to your own livestock enterprise?

We first need to divide our livestock into groups; dry cows, cows with calves at their side, etc. Once we do that we need to calculate what the feed needs (nutrient requirements) are of those particular groups. After that is done, we can then begin to allocate our hay supplies as they best fit each groups’ nutrient needs. We surely don’t need to feed that dry cow 22% CP alfalfa while feeding that cow with a calf at her side some very mature tall fescue.

That’s where our “hay testing” can pay big dividends. Knowing those critical values for protein, fiber, digestibility, etc allows us to get the optimal value out of each particular lot of hay as well as maximum (dry cows probably don’t need “maximum”) production from each livestock group. This also provides us with a real dollar value for each lot of hay.

If we have excess hay, this may allow us to market our higher quality product for more dollars on the cash hay market. This might even be prudent if all we have is high quality hay….sale the high end hay and purchase other hay for your lesser livestock nutrient requirements at a lower price.

There are many components to making high quality hay. Some of these include; adjust pH and fertility to levels needed by the crop, prepare adequate seed bed, use certified seed and correct seeding rates, control insects and disease, cut at proper stage of maturity. And, after you do all of those correctly, hope and pray that Mother Nature will cooperate with timely rainfall. Brevity does not allow us to follow-up on all the details for making high quality hay.
### Effect of various storage methods on hay losses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storage method</th>
<th>Losses</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Handling and storage</td>
<td>Animal refusal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the ground</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On gravel</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On tires</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a wooden rack</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a wooden rack with plastic cover</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>In a pole barn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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One thing I do want to touch on is storage of the product afterwards. Table 1 shows total losses of up to 66% of our product if we do not do a good job of storage. That’s 2 out of 3 round bales lost. Significant dollars are wasted if you do not store our hay properly. All of the input costs for those two bales are essentially *lost*. The table also shows several storage methods that will reduce storage loss.

In summary, if you really want to know how good your hay is, ask many questions before the initial production begins, make good managerial decisions for production and harvest, have the proper storage necessary, finally market the hay to the appropriate enterprise and then do the math. Only then will you know “How Good Your Hay Is”? 

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20