Progress reported on standardized alfalfa testing

DE KALB, Il. – Good looks may earn you fame and fortune in a beauty contest. But when selecting alfalfa hay, looks alone may not tell the whole story.

Feed value, not just good appearance, is the key to quality hay. It also may be the most difficult factor to measure consistently and accurately. That's why the National Alfalfa Hay Quality Committee wants to establish a uniform procedure for testing and reporting the feed value of alfalfa hay. Samples would be processed the same throughout the United States.

Until now, there has been no uniformity in the methods used to evaluate alfalfa hay. Each state and laboratory uses several different - and often conflicting - test methods.

Dairymen feeding alfalfa hay in California, for example, often get different test results from its neighboring states, Nevada and Utah. Alfalfa hay that tests 54 percent Total Digestable Nutrients (TDN) in California may appear inferior to Nevada or Utah alfalfa that tests 68 percent TDN. The only real difference, however, may be in the method the hay was tested and reported. Dairymen needing accurate results to balance feed rations are left confused.

"Different states have different programs," says Vern L. Marble, extension agronomist, University of California at Davis, and chairman of the committee. "And. the numbers don't match. Several different procedures are used."

Harry D. Gates Jr., secretary of the National Hay Association in Jackson, Mich., adds, "You can take an alfalfa hay sample to one laboratory, get your results, then take the same sample down the road and get an entirely different set of results."

"Producers want quality alfalfa hay," Gates points out. "And, they also want consistency of test results."

The new testing program was presented at the National Alfalfa Hay Quality Testing Workshop, March 22-23, 1984, in Chicago.

In an effort to establish some consistency from laboratory to laboratory and state to state, the National Alfalfa Hay Quality Committee is working to certify laboratories throughout the United States. Each laboratory - whether state-operated or privately managed - would follow accepted hay testing guidelines. Testing will initially involve only alfalfa, but could be expanded later to include other hay forages.

The new testing system will be based on analyses for dry matter (DM) and acid detergent fiber (ADF). ADF will be used to predict digestible dry matter (DDM). A crude protein (CP) analysis is also recommended but is not part of the DDM prediction system. A conversion from DDM to digestible energy (DE) is included for use in balancing rations.

The committee sent the first of four standardized alfalfa hay samples to laboratories interested in certification during June. Participating labs will test those samples and return the results to a coordinating laboratory. The analysis and results will be used in lab certification. Final lab certification is expected within the next year.

The National Alfalfa Hay Quality Committee will eventually publish a list of certified laboratories. Testing will be voluntary and will not involve hay grading, Gates explains.

Procedures for obtaining good hay samples are also being developed. Marble says, "dif-(Turn to Page D11)



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