



Brockett's Ag Advice

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Three Cheers for (Quality) Hay!

American agriculture has become the most effective agriculture in the world due to a number of reasons. One of these reasons has been the rather unique cooperation between the farmer, the researcher, and the commercial interests. For many years the catalyst bringing the three ingredients together has been the Cooperative Extension Service or as many farm families knew it, the "county agents."

My father was a "county agent" for well over 40 years in New Jersey. Those of you who are regular readers of this column know that I periodically quote him on management and marketing

ideas. Actually this column did not start off as an ode to extension, so I will save that for a future column and get on with business.

Sometimes in the hurry to publish experimental reports from both the academic researcher or the commercial researcher, results are not as critically analyzed as they should be. I was pleased when someone else questioned the results in print from a study that showed no increase of somatic cell count from stress on a cow's udder (mishandling, overmilking and the like). The study results showed that the only thing that raised somatic cell counts was infection. From a

practical point of view the dissenter said "what is the difference?" I would agree with his sentiments.

Hay Protein

A few days ago I was reading about an experiment done in Florida with dairy cows and alfalfa hay. The purpose of the experiment was a bit cloudy, but the conclusions were that alfalfa protein was not as good as soybean meal protein for milk production. Unfortunately the report on that particular experiment lacked a number of verifying facts, so should be taken with a grain of salt.

This is the case with a number of experiments that are reported in the so called "popular press". Too often these experiments are reported as news before all of the facts are really known. In the 30 years that I have been in extension in Pennsylvania, I have noted that the most profitable dairymen are invariably those who pay a lot of attention to producing top quality hay or haylage. That does not mean that good cow production records cannot be made with hay forage of lesser quality.

Time and time again people do make good production records even with rather low quality hay or haylage. Some of these herds even top the DHIA list, for whatever that is worth. What it does mean to me is that milk produced with medium or low quality hay and/or haylage costs more to produce than milk made with high quality forage. As prices take a downward trend in the next few years, cost of production will become more and more critical. Those who can produce milk for \$8 per cwt will obviously remain profitable, while those who insist on producing milk for \$14 will find it more and more difficult to stay in business without some type of subsidy. Even low interest loans, loan deferral, free money (unpaid bills), family loans, and off farm jobs may not be enough to stave off the inevitable for those who have no desire to reduce their cost of production.

The time to start reducing production costs is right now. Start out with producing the very best hay quality possible. Be ready to harvest when the alfalfa is in its

best stage of growth, not when it is most convenient for you. Set priorities—you have a lot of things that need to be done in the spring and not enough time to do all of them. Hay or haylage making should have a top priority because (1) first cutting will usually represent half or more of your total hay crop; (2) how and when you take off the first cutting will have a major effect on the size and quality of the later cuttings; (3) alfalfa protein is one of the least expensive sources of protein you can feed right now; and (4) everything else that needs to be done on the farm will fall into place once hay harvest is completed.

I would strongly recommend that you make several "rainy day" lists of jobs that can be done when the weather does not cooperate with hay making. It would also be advisable to make as much of that first crop into haylage as possible. Why? Haylage requires less drying time and the spring often contains few periods of more than three days at a time of decent drying weather. Haylage can usually be completely harvested in less time than hay and the earlier the first cutting is taken off the field, the earlier the second cutting can get started. As "Kermit the Frog" would say on "Sesame Street" (ask your kids about this one) "Lets have three cheers for hay yay, yay, yay!"

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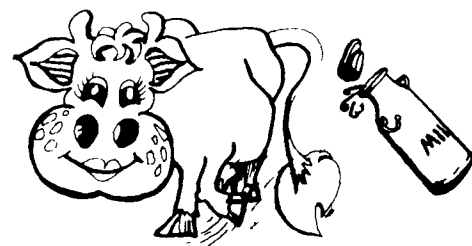
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