

The Value Of Quality In Marketing Alfalfa Hay

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NEWARK, DE. — At our last Del-Mar Forage Day, Dr. D.C. Petritz from the agricultural economics department of Purdue University spoke about how to get more money for farm hay sales. The topic is important since hay can be a considerable source of side income in this area for our farmers. Too often hay for sale brings little money because it has been rained on, is too old, or too stemmy and dusty, or even moldy, so it ends up as low priced mulch or for compost in mushroom houses.

Yet producing alfalfa hay isn't a low cost enterprise. Total production costs at 8 tons per acre average \$400 per acre. Profits depend on yield and quality. Break-even yields may be around 6 tons at a market price of \$60 per ton. Prices, of course, are influenced by supply and demand. U.S. alfalfa hay production in 1987 was around 88 million tons on 25 million acres, about 5 percent less than the previous year. However, hay production of all kinds was 186 million tons—up 2 percent from the year before.

Weather, carry-over stocks and pasture conditions are market factors influencing supply, demand and prices. Hay supplies in the Northeast are estimated to be up by

25 percent in Virginia, down 11 percent in Maryland, up 5 percent in Delaware, down 8 percent in Pennsylvania, down 7 percent in Ohio and up 1 percent in New York compared to last year. However, long distance hay shipments from the Midwest and Canada are expected to hold prices down, especially if the winter continues to be mild here and silage crops for cattle remain plentiful.

Given this supply picture, quality is the only variable over which the producer looking for a better price has much control.

The ability to determine quality at the time of sale through an instant nutrient lab analysis from Near-Infra-Red instruments instead of the old-fashioned wet-chemistry would help tremendous-

ly in getting better prices to the producer. Adoption of uniform quality standards based on the nutrient content of hays, rather than their smell, color and touch is also needed. Since hays of different nutrient content have different feeding values for cattle, sheep and horses, it follows that they should have different prices.

So what is the relationship between hay quality and its economic value? Simply said it is (1) the nutrient content in the hay, (2) the amount of it voluntarily eaten by the animals and (3) the performance of the animals in meat, milk, fiber and work after digesting the hay at a certain rate.

Stage of maturity has the biggest influence on all three factors. Experiments with dairy cows have

shown that milk production declines 1 pound per cow per day for each day advance in maturity beyond prebloom when feeding alfalfa hay.

In Wisconsin experiments, pre-bloom alfalfa was shown to have 24 percent more nutritional value than full bloom alfalfa hay. As more mature alfalfa was fed, an increasing amount of soybean oil meal was needed as a supplement to maintain high milk production levels. And this higher supplement level raised the cost of milk production.

So you see, hay quality is extremely important to the hay buyer and should translate into a willingness to pay different prices

depending on the quality offered. This, in turn, should translate into a willingness of the seller to offer nutrient analysis as a means of obtaining better prices. Having this factual information available at farm sales or auctions should be well worth the trouble and help assure superior sales and more confident buyers— even repeat buyers!

Years ago, Professor Shenk of Penn State University pioneered the use of Near-Infra-Red hay testing instruments, but we haven't yet seen wide adoption in this region. Wouldn't using this equipment be an important factor in making the regional market more profitable for both producers and buyers?

Sullivan County DHIA November, 1987 Rolling Herd Averages

Name	Brd.	No. Cows	% In Milk	Days In Milk	Lbs. Milk	Lbs. Fat
D&D Hottenstein	3	59.4	86.8	21,372	782	
Richard R Higley	3	90.7	86.0	20,236	769	
Raymond Norconk	3	41.4	87.7	20,998	721	
Joan Woodhead	B3	34.0	84.4	18,731	711	
Bobwood Acres	3	39.9	90.8	20,734	700	
John & Marvin Brown	B3	47.7	83.8	18,279	680	
Lambert Farms	B3	154.3	89.1	18,204	665	

Lactations

Name	Brd.	No. Cows	% In Milk	Days In Milk	Lbs. Milk	Lbs. Fat
D&D Hottenstein	3	5-1	305	22,543	3.9	883
Tavia	3	3-2	297	24,884	3.4	863

Dairy Meetings

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vessels occurs in the early lactation period when the farmer is feeding a lot of grain to her," stated Nocek.

"A good manager will watch his cows during this period to detect if a cow is walking tenderly on her feet. He can examine her to see if the foot feels warm to the touch or apply pressure to her foot to see if it is sensitive. This laminitis has got to be caught right away or it could cost him the cow."

When this does occur Nocek urges the farmer to take a look at all his cows to see if there other problems instead of over reacting and cutting the grain in all the feed.

"Lameness if not detected right away and treated could result in blown-up foot with a few days and that 100-pound milker will have fallen to about 50 pounds per day," warns Nocek.

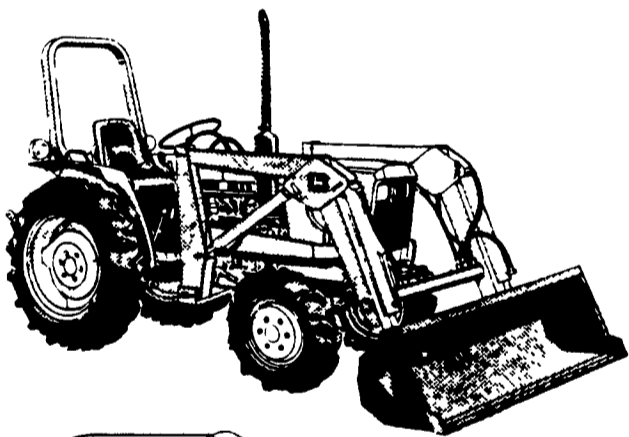
Free stalls and confinement

stalls both have disadvantages in relation to foot problems. The free stalls usually has a slippery floor, with more moisture around leading to softer hooves. According to Nocek, foot baths would be recommended more than a trim to harden the hoof material. Confinement stalls, although a dryer environment, may be too dry sometimes and cause heel cracks and tend to make the hoof brittle.

"Prevention of lameness can best be done by trimming and examining feet and hooves atleast once a year and it would be better if it were twice a year. An overgrowth of tissue on the bottom of the foot, an ulcer, or lameness can be detected and trimmed or treated," said Nocek.

To avoid the loss of a high producer for either a short time or indefinitely, prevention is more valuable than the cure.

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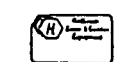
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