

Did You Really Want To Bale Straw?

NEWARK, De. — Straw. That's what many of you got last year after it rained for the first cutting, and the alfalfa got into full bloom. And they you had to rake more than once, and too many leaves shattered and fell back onto the field.

Maybe you really wanted straw, because your feeding program for your high-producing cows was

short on fiber — specifically, hay fiber. And making late-cut hay was your way of curing twisted cow stomachs, improving low milk-fat tests and avoiding the purchase of bicarbonate of soda for your feed ration.

Feeding straw makes biological and veterinary sense, but did it make economic sense to use your alfalfa this way? When you delib-

erately cut alfalfa and other forages late, thus harvesting only stems and straw, you forgo a valuable source of cheap protein and energy.

By now most dairy farmers must have heard umpteen times that forages are most valuable in the vegetative stage and that their nutritive qualities get worse with every day toward and beyond bloom. This is

so predictable that I can use the cutting date instead of a laboratory analysis to tell me the value of a particular forage as hay, greenchop, silage or haylage.

We've done much research on this here at the Delaware Agricultural Experiment Station. Haylage is the ideal alternative to spoiled hay-straw when you want to assure the feeding value of a forage crop by cutting early, despite the threat of rain. And if you don't have vertical, oxygen-tight steel or stave silos, the horizontal silage bag is an ideal option, especially since it's 27 percent cheaper than any upright silo — a fact we've documented here with our University of Delaware dairy herd operation.

Even before alfalfa harvest, you'll need to decide when to cut rye, wheat, barley and other winter forages. These crops become straw even faster than alfalfa, if you're slow on the trigger.

Here's what can happen to feed values if your forage crop is cut at three different maturity stages:

	Boot or bud stage	Early bloom or milk stage	Mature stage
Wheat, energy %	68	59	48
protein %	13	8	5
fiber %	20	32	45
Alfalfa, energy %	71	60	46
protein %	24	16	10
fiber %	21	31	39
Sorghum, energy %	65	57	5
protein %	9	7	5
fiber %	25	26	30
Bermudagrass, energy %	60	52	48
protein %	14	11	7
fiber %	29	31	43

Summer forages such as sorghum and Bermudagrass are similar to alfalfa and winter forages in terms of their nutrient composition at different stages of maturity. If you harvest these crops when they're late and strawy, although you get more tons per acre, your cows will milk less per day and you'll have to buy more equipment to keep the milk tank full.

In research at the University of Georgia, when rye-wheat silage from three successive stages of maturity — early, middle and late — was fed, milk per cow per day declined from 37 pounds to 20 pounds until supplements made up the difference.

When alfalfa hay was fed at four successive stages of maturity from bud to mature, corresponding milk per cow per day went down from 68 to 38 pounds. So remember, waiting too long to cut forage crops this spring for hay, silage, green chop or haylage can rob you of much needed farm profits.



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