

Extra Rain Helping, Hurting Hay Growers

PINE BLUFF, ARK.

Homeowners lamenting their wildly growing lawns and the lack of dry weather to cut them can empathize with the state's hay growers.

"Their hay crops are needing to be harvested and it just can't get harvested," said Don Plunkett, Jefferson County extension staff chair for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture. "A lot of hay is getting bigger and bigger and losing quality."

He encouraged producers to have forage samples analyzed for nutrient quality. Plunkett also said one producer, who normally cuts hay five times, lost his alfalfa field due to excess rain.

What growers in the eastern part of the state need are four to five days of low humidity and sunshine to cut and dry before baling.

In 2008, Arkansas growers produced 3.1 million tons of hay, valued at \$273 million, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

The rain may be costly for Arkansas growers. Some Texans with burnt pastures thanks to a drought have contracted with Arkansas hay growers for their crops.

Thanks to the constant rain, Arkansas grow-

ers are "hindered in getting that hay harvested. "You're looking at high-dollar commodities that are sitting in the fields that you can't put a wrapper on and be able to load up and sell."

"This makes two consecutive summers with record or near-record rain," said John Jennings, extension professor with the division. "But we have two more months before fall weather."

However, in western Arkansas, the story was quite different.

"Western Arkansas got very dry through June and some producers were feeding hay," Jennings said. "Recent rains there have improved that situation."

Robert Seay, Benton County extension agent for the division, said Monday he welcomed the rain.

"We've essentially had no rain over the past two weeks and every hay field cut managed to get baled on schedule," he said, adding that there was a downside. "No rain has made poor conditions for fertilizer efficiency and yield."

The NASS weekly issued on Monday had a somewhat less gloomy outlook: Alfalfa is 68 percent good to excellent, other hay is 52 percent good to excellent and pasture and range in general is 57 percent good to excellent. △



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