

Hay Testing Pays

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An \$18 investment in a hay test can save you many times that amount or at least allow you to make smarter decisions when you go supplement shopping. I've had a dozen hay samples cross my desk in the last couple of weeks and they really show what's in that 1,000 pound bale. Some of the samples were from hay that was home-raised. Other samples were from hay that might have been purchased. Fortunately, for the prospective buyer the hay test showed the protein and energy levels were so low his fall-calving cows would need both protein and energy supplement. After he saw the results, he passed on the hay.

Another lot of hay came back with an unacceptable level of nitrates that require it be limited to about 35 percent of the animal's daily dry matter intake. Of course, not all the hay was questionable. Some, in fact 8 of the 12 samples, had adequate protein levels for most classes of adult cows, whether fall or winter calvers.

When you get a hay test back, look at the dry matter column. This allows you to more accurately compare hays with varying moisture levels. If the test shows the moisture level to be much above 15 percent, mold could be a problem. Next, check the NDF (neutral detergent fiber). This value gives an indirect estimate of expected intake. Lower percentages result in cattle liking it thus eating more each day.

If the hay is straight grass, a NDF value of 60 percent or lower is acceptable. As the percentage goes towards 70 percent, intake will drop markedly and it works better for windbreaks and bedding.

Legumes should have significantly less NDF with straight alfalfa expected to have values in the 40 percent range. A grass-legume mixed hay would probably land somewhere between the 40 and 60 percent values.

Total digestible nutrients (TDN) or energy is maybe the most important value on the report. I like hay that can be fed to all classes of cattle and you can see their resulting performance. It probably takes a 58 percent TDN or better to do that. Hay in the 55 percent range an up is very acceptable for many classes of cows, but as you drop below 55 percent gains and milk production will suffer. Hay in the low 50s on TDN and below may work in a pinch, but likely will need supplement help.

At the bottom of the lab report is the Relative Feed Value (RFV) low numbers, below 80 indicate rather poor hay relative to those higher values. Some hay dealers use this number to place a value on their hay. For example, alfalfa sellers may use \$1 per RFV point to value one ton of hay. Grasses typically have a lower price value per point.

Finally, I'll mention crude protein which many folks feel is the most important nutrient. Remember many cows can get along quite nicely with 8 ½ to 10 percent protein hay. It's surprising how many samples I see that test 10 percent or more. Sure, I'd like the test to run 12 percent protein which gives you some insurance on growing steer and heifer diets. That's needed also on heavy milking cows and in some first-calf heifer situations.

If you'd like to sample some of your hay let me know and you can borrow our hay probe. Many of our extension centers have them so if you live in another county, check with them. Hay testing just makes sense! Δ

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