

Hay Tests Are Revealing, Worth The Cost

SPRINGFIELD, MO.

A forage analysis costs from \$14 to \$18, depending on how much information a producer wants.

But the good news is that for that small fee, a producer can save lots of money on winter supplements or spend that money more wisely purchasing what their cows or calves need to perform well.

Eldon Cole, a University of Missouri Extension livestock specialist, recently collected 10 hay samples that ranged from straight fescue to alfalfa with several grass-legume blends.

“The results were eye-opening when you matched up the test results with the nutrient requirements for cow and calves,” said Cole.

When most producers look at a hay test, the first item they pay attention to is the protein level. Among Cole’s 10 samples, the protein level on a dry matter basis ranged from 8.7 to 18.9 percent.

“According to the National Research Council’s nutrient requirements, all 10 hays would be adequate for dry cows in various stages of pregnancy. However, for fall-calvers that are average milkers, two of the 10 would be short on protein, but not by much,” said Cole.

As for stocker calves weighing around 600 pounds, four hays fell under 10 percent protein and would need to have protein added if daily

gains over 1.5 pounds per day are expected.

The energy or total digestible nutrient (TDN) values were more varied yet are the most important item on a hay test. In Cole’s sample these values ranged from 46.6 percent to 59.3 percent TDN.

“If the fall-calvers were only given access to either of those hays, the cows on the low TDN hay would need to eat about 10 pounds more of it per day to meet their energy needs,” said Cole.

Cole adds that given the neutral detergent fiber values found in the hay test, it’s unlikely a cow would be able to consume enough of the low quality hay to meet her energy needs.

In fact, based on dairy research, she could only eat about half of her dry matter requirement.

“Since most farms have good fall growth of fescue to graze, the shortfall in energy intake can be made up with it,” said Cole.

However, as winter weather sets in and the availability of fescue pasture diminishes, farmers need to know what is in their hay supply so they can blend their hay or purchase the supplement their cattle need.

“It’s no disgrace to have to purchase some feed, just make sure you buy what you need,” said Cole. “The bottom line is that in these economic times the expenditure of \$18 on a forage test is worth the cost.” Δ



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