

Late-Cut Fescue Hay Can Lead To Low Quality

Forage Feeding This Winter Says Extension Specialist

SPRINGFIELD, MO.

There continues to be several fescue hay fields in the Ozarks harvested for hay this summer. But the timing of harvest has a major impact on the quality of the hay according to available research and Tim Schnakenberg, agronomy specialist with University of Missouri Extension.

"Late-cut hay can lead to low quality forage for feeding this winter and most likely will require supplementation to meet the nutritional needs of livestock," said Schnakenberg.

According to Schnakenberg, the ideal time for balancing maximum quality with production is when grass hay is in the boot to early heading stage.

"We are well past this stage at this point," said Schnakenberg.

A Tennessee study compared the performance of 500 pound Holstein steers fed fescue hay harvested in the late boot stage to hay that was mature and producing seed.

They found that the late boot stage hay resulted in protein levels that were 1.8 times higher. Dry matter intake per day was 1.5 times higher and the steers gained an average of one pound more per day on this hay using half as much hay for each pound of gain.

"Yield of the late boot stage hay in the field it was harvested in was only 47 percent of that of the mature hay. This demonstrated that hay yield is minimized by cutting on time but gain

from the cattle fed this hay made up the difference," said Schnakenberg.

Evaluating hay begins with looking at the physical traits of the hay according to Schnakenberg.

In many cases the stage of growth of the hay at the time of harvest is more important than the species of hay that is used.

"Farmers should prefer hay that has a low weed content, low level of seed heads, high content of leaves, good green color and no signs of mold," said Schnakenberg.

Testing hay is the only way to know the true quality of what is being fed to cattle. The analysis can provide the protein level, fiber content, total digestible nutrients and relative feed value of the hay. University of Missouri Extension livestock specialists can assist in determining the amount of supplementation that will be needed after seeing the test results.

"The rule of thumb for good quality hay is to feed hay that has a high protein and low fiber content," said Schnakenberg.

Testing hay requires the use of a core sampler that will penetrate the core of hay bales using an electric drill or hand brace. At least ten small square bales should be sampled to make one sample submitted to the lab. Five to 10 large round bales should be sampled from the side of the roll. A quart should be submitted to a lab certified by the National Hay Testing Association. Δ