Over-Mature Hay Drops In Quality: Testing Helps Develop Balanced Ration For Winter Feeding

COLUMBIA, MO.

Rain-delayed haymaking leads to poor-quality feed for livestock next winter. Supplemental feed will be needed to make balanced rations, says University of Missouri Extension forage specialist Rob Kallenbach.

A hay test makes the first step in learning how much supplement will be needed, Kallenbach told MU regional agronomists in a weekly teleconference.

For best quality, hay should be harvested in May before plants set seed. When seed heads fill, sugars and proteins move from leaves into the seeds. High fiber remains instead of nutrients needed for high-quality hay.

However, this May did not give farmers many rain-free days to cut, cure and bale hay. Rainfall extended into June, further lowering odds for making good hay.

"More hay than usual will be cut in July. Not a good sign," Kallenbach says.

If the hayfield has not been cut, he says, do it soon as possible. The regrowth has a chance to make higher-quality feed. Unfortunately, cool-season grasses go into summer slump, growing little in July and August. Regrowth may not come until fall rains return. Applying nitrogen fertilizer in mid- to late August can boost yield and quality of fall growth, Kallenbach says.

Rather than making fall hay, Kallenbach recommends stockpiling fall grass growth for strip grazing. Stockpiled pastures can be grazed well into winter.

One extension specialist reported that producers who didn't cut hay in the spring want to delay cutting hay until fall. They believe the forage will gain nutrients from regrowth.

"Don't do that," was Kallenbach's quick response.

There's an extra hazard in that over-mature hay. Ergot alkaloids may be contained in the seed heads. That further lowers quality.

Start with a clean field to allow better-quality forage to grow, Kallenbach says. Standing grass allows leaves to rot and dry rather than gain quality.

Last year's drought allowed making higher-quality hay than this year. The spring of 2012 was wet enough to grow hay. Then it was dry enough that hay could be harvested without rain damage.

Testing hay now will aid in making balanced rations for winter feeding, Kallenbach says.

Details on taking hay samples and on testing labs can be obtained from regional MU Extension agronomists across the state. Δ