

To Raise Quality, Make Hay Before Seeds Are Set

2013 Yield May Be Low, Says MU Specialist.

COLUMBIA, MO.

“Don’t delay making hay,” says Rob Kallenbach, University of Missouri Extension.

It might not seem like haymaking time, or haymaking weather, but early harvest results in more quality forage through the season, says the state forage specialist.

Producers needing to build reserves of baled hay depleted by hard winter should harvest early and often.

May is a better hay month than June and far better than July.

With lack of warm weather, hay developed slowly this spring. Kallenbach estimates yields fall 25 to 30 percent behind normal.

Lack of sunshine caused thinner stands. The plants grew tall, but the grass didn’t thicken, putting out fewer tillers. “The undergrowth is just not there,” Kallenbach says.

While yields may seem low on the first cuttings, an early harvest will allow stronger second cuttings.

Kallenbach advises cutting high-quality hay while it is available. Quality hay will be worth more as feed next winter.

Warm days in the third week of May boosted forage yields. In the first week of May, rising-plate-meter readings showed only 70 pounds of dry matter per day per acre.

“With warmth, and lots of moisture, we’re getting 140-pound dry-matter readings,” Kallenbach told regional specialists in a weekly teleconference.

Jim Jarman, extension agronomist, Fulton, Mo., reports fescue seed heads are emerging. “It happened quickly in the warm weather. The forage quality will diminish by the minute.”

Kallenbach says he’s seen seed heads on orchardgrass.

“Hay should be harvested before seeds set,” Kallenbach reminds producers. When seed

heads emerge, the grass transfers proteins and sugars from leaves into the seeds. That lowers nutrient content in hay harvested after seed heads emerge.

By making a first cutting early, more grass will grow for the second cutting. “We can grow a lot of hay between now and Memorial Day,” Kallenbach says. That regrowth can be cut for hay, or grazed longer into the warm months of June and July.

Once weather gets hot, cool-season grass growth slumps.

“Once grass matures, and seed heads fill, it stops growing. But if hay is cut before seeds set, the grass keeps adding leaves.”

When asked about making alfalfa hay in July, Kallenbach said, “It won’t be dairy-quality hay, but it will be better than other hay made in July.”

Craig Roberts, MU Extension specialist, said this year might become a year for ergot to appear in seed heads of pasture grasses.

Ergot, a poisonous fungus, replaces seeds in the grass heads.

“Ergot causes lameness in grazing cattle. Stocker calves eating ergot stop gaining,” Roberts says.

Kallenbach encourages high-level management of hay this year.

“We’ll need the hay,” he adds. “Many acres have been taken out of forage and planted to crops. High prices for commodities take away hay land.”

Regional agronomists at MU Extension centers can answer questions about haymaking. They gather in the weekly teleconference to trade tips and alerts on growing conditions.

From southwestern Missouri came a warning that the first armyworms have been seen in pastures. Scouting can start further north to provide early controls. Δ