

THE FORAGER

Agronomics with livestock in mind!

ALERT! *Faster Hay Crop Season...*

The season for hay-making is progressing faster than any year of the previous 10 and far ahead of normal. There is “money to be made” in making hay before planting corn this year in many areas. In recent examination of heat units for much of New York and New England, these statistics are running far ahead of last year. In spite of forecasted snow and cold/cooler weather into April and May, combined with occasional 80 (+/-) days... the maturity of this year’s hay crop is moving at record pace. As of April 27th, this crop was averaging nine days ahead of the earliest previous warm year and if very warm/hot days continue this will push the crop even earlier by up to two weeks ahead of what is considered “normal”.

The big concern is that the fields which are grass, or more than half grass, will slip by in quality before most producers realize they are ready. Yes, this is insanely early, but that is the weather – similar to last year but warmer (at times).

Depending on temperature, alfalfa will change from 0.5 to 1 NDFd/day. Grass, however, is faster. Data from Dr. Larry Chase at Cornell University’s Department of Animal Science, showed that one unit change of dNDF = 0.37 lbs dry matter intake (DMI) and **0.55 lbs of 4% milk/cow/day**. As forage feeding levels increase this plays an increasingly important role. For example, if the harvest is 10 days late and the producer is feeding 200 cows with first cut for half the lactation, and the forage makes up 25% of the diet with \$14/cwt milk, the producer is looking at about a **\$56,000 (annual) impact**. When choosing between planting corn and harvesting a hay crop, a producer is likely to be further ahead harvesting hay. Corn will NOT decrease in quality with a slight delay in planting, especially this early in the year. It only affects yield in a small percentage. However, each day-delay has a huge impact on the milk producing ability of the hay crop forage.

With low(er) milk prices, it is absolutely critical that producers have a profitable base of sufficient quantities of high quality forage. **For long term profitability (in the northeast dairy industry, as well as other geographic areas), producers need to be feeding more than 60% forage in the diet.** High forage diets can put profitability back into the milk check, if the forage is quality forage. Producers can decide what quality forage can be fed by WHEN they START and FINISH their hay crop harvest.

Adjustments must be made depending on geographic location. Individual fields should also help determine when producers should start harvesting. Using alfalfa to predict
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when to harvest can assist this process as well. Simply stated, the height of alfalfa can predict when it and grass stands in your climatic and geographic area should be cut. The chart below can assist this (along with a ruler or tape measure):

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| When alfalfa near grass is 13” tall | Cut the pure grass stands |
| When alfalfa is mixed 50/50 with grass and is 23” tall | Cut mixed stands |
| When alfalfa is 30” tall in >80% alfalfa | Cut mostly alfalfa stands |

Using this simple prediction system to determine what field(s) to harvest first, will help a producer to harvest all fields at peak quality. That can help ensure all fields produce high quality forage, even though the harvest may have started a week later or more for some fields.

If a producer has fields that are in low, warm and sheltered locations, they need to be aware that these areas are ready earlier than the rest of the fields. A well-drained soil will have forage ahead of poor-drained soil, and a north-facing slope will be behind a south-facing slope. For some farms, their alfalfa may be ready (to harvest) before a north-facing, mostly grass field is. One extreme example found alfalfa in a well-drained, sheltered field next to a stream at 30 inches – ready to cut – while the majority of the farm with north-facing and less than ideal drained soil was at least a week behind, even for grass harvest!

A health dollop of **common sense is needed with any biological system**. Producers need to figure how long it takes to harvest a quality hay crop and then start cutting before the forage quality has peaked... and finish just after it has peaked, assuring better forages in the diet. If the extended weather forecast indicates rain, it might be better to cut early and get the harvest in, rather than wait and risk the loss of quality in the forage. Use whatever is available to produce the best forages, which can help to produce more milk and improved profit potential.

(Edited from an article by Thomas Kilcer, Cornell Extension Agronomist and Advanced Ag System’s publication – Crop Soil News)



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