

Grazing Bites

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It certainly has been a challenging year so far to try and get any “dry” hay baled. I’ve heard all my life that the weather or rather the rainfall all balances out eventually; perhaps we are playing catch up for last summer now. With wet ground, and showers close together, there is little quality time to cure dry hay. Of course, I talk all the time about ways to reduce the need of hay and inputs, but you should probably keep some around as part of a contingency plan or insurance policy in all cases. Most operations still need hay for key periods for their system. Each farm’s goal(s) is different and you adjust supplemental feed to meet your farm needs. Just don’t get so carried away with mowing so much that you don’t have anything left to graze...and have to turn around and feed that hay sooner than you should have...the dog is really chasing his tail at that point. Animal therapists talk about dogs being somewhat OCD with their tail chasing behavior; sometimes our obsession with making hay appears to be similar.



Some questions to ponder might include: Do we really need as much hay as we are making? Do we really know and understand the true cost of making hay and the nutrient removal that occurs? Are we getting nutrients back on those fields where hay was removed? And lastly; are we protecting our investment by storing it properly? I don’t have room in one article to do justice for all of these questions, but we will hit on all of them and most have been discussed in the past.

We need to really think about how much hay we really need. If we are cutting so much hay, especially off grazable fields, that we are not, at a minimum, still grazing the whole normal forage season without supplementation, then we are probably cutting too much hay. Forage and the animal requirements for that dry matter have to be balanced or something else substituted in for part of it. We could certainly harvest all of the forage and carry it all to the cows, but that is not very efficient, especially today. The most efficient system is still allowing these four-legged, four-wheel-drive harvesters to harvest it themselves and then spread the manure back on the same site where it belongs. They should work for us; not we working for them. Grazing is economically and ecologically more sound than feeding anything else.

Traditionally, we all grew up thinking that we had to make hay out of everything we could and at worst if we got carried away, we would just start feeding it earlier. When labor and inputs were cheap, that might have been more of a viable option. Today, that is very debatable. Raising and making hay has exceeded what it is worth in a lot of cases.

Inputs are inputs; sometimes we just don’t think of some things that way or think about needing to include them. Mowing, raking, tedding and baling all require a driver, tractor, fuel and implement; none of that is free. Many think of labor, especially if they are doing it themselves as free, but you could be doing something else that was making you money and your time is worth something too. Then there is string, wrap, netting, wrap or whatever is being used; more costs. One of the things that many forget about is the nutrients and carbon that is removed from the field. That also has value and one of the

things that has gone up a lot in the past few years. Nutrients removed, eventually need to return to the field...so now there is fertilizer costs and perhaps some spreading expense. You may say, “no, I haul all of that manure back out into the hay field so I don’t lose those nutrients.” Not all nutrients are hauled back, some are left where they ate the hay and now we also have the labor, fuel, tractor and equipment of hauling the manure back to where it was removed...still an input, still a cost.

We should all stop and think about how many days we are actually relying on hay in our operation. How many days do you feed hay? I’ve heard Jim Gerrish say numerous times; paraphrasing him, “winter feed costs are the main expense for most cow-calf producers...period.” “We feed hay to the extent that we make hay.” “Cow producers in Michigan, Missouri and Mississippi all feed hay for about 130 days a year...” It would pay for all of us to seriously think about how much we feed. Do the higher livestock numbers pay for all of the extra inputs required to keep them? Could we make more with less; that is something to pencil out on one of these rainy days. I would encourage everyone to shoot for 60 days and no more than 90. It is possible, with some planning, to accomplish it with less also.

Lastly, for what we do harvest as dry hay, are we storing it properly? John F. Grimes, an Ohio State University Extension Beef Coordinator recently made some very good points in “Forage Focus” in the Ohio Beef Cattle letter which says:

“A fact sheet from the University of Kentucky outlines the potential losses associated from a variety of storage systems: Round Bale Hay Storage in Kentucky can be found at the following link: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/agr/agr171/agr171.pdf>. The dry matter losses associated with a variety of storage systems listed in the publication area as follows: Conventional shed: 4-7%; Pole structure with plastic roof on pad: 4-7%; Reusable tarp on pad: 4-7%; Bale sleeve on ground: 4-7%; Plastic wrap on ground: 4-7%; Elevated stack on pad (rock plus filter fabric): 13-17%; Net wrap on ground: 15-25%; Stacked on ground: 25-35%.

Hay is simply too valuable of a commodity to waste as much of it as we do. I am sure that if we surveyed every hay producer, we would come up with a wide range of figures as to the cost of producing a ton of hay. The OSU Extension Department of Agricultural, Environmental, and Development Economics recently published their 2013 hay enterprise budgets that showed the cost of production for grass hay at \$67.86/ton and alfalfa hay at \$92.96/ton. The beef producer that raises his own hay should at least value the hay at the cost of production. However, the value of hay sold in the market would more accurately represent the costs in a beef enterprise. Regardless of how you value the hay, can you afford 10-35% storage losses commonly seen with typical round bale hay storage? A 20 % loss of \$100/ton hay adds up fairly quickly.

The amount you can invest in your hay storage systems will certainly depend on the amount and type of hay that is being stored. The larger the amount of hay being stored and the more valuable the hay, the more you can justify spending to reduce storage losses. Aside from constructing buildings for hay storage, there are some key points to remember to help reduce storage losses. Consider the following:

1. Hay/soil contact is typically the primary source of losses associated with hay stored outdoors. Cover your storage area with rocks 1-3 inches in diameter piled 4-8 inches deep. Using geotextile cloth below the rocks will increase the life of the pad.

2. *If placing bales on the ground cannot be avoided, make sure a well-drained area is selected.*
3. *Hay should be stored in an open area that can receive maximum sunlight. Hay should never be stored under trees. It is also preferable to orient bale rows to run north and south to allow for maximum daily sun exposure.*
4. *Bales should be placed so the sides of the bales do not touch. Allow at least three feet of space between rows to allow for air circulation. An exception to this would be if you are stacking bales in a pyramid fashion for covering with a tarp or other material.*
5. *The flat ends of bales should be firmly butted against one another as this can protect the ends almost as well as if they were one continuous bale.*

The bottom line is that producers need to do a better job of preserving hay in order to insure adequate supplies of quality feeds for our herds and help improve profitability. I suspect the days of producing or purchasing "cheap" hay are a thing of the past for the foreseeable future. Hay is a valuable commodity and it is about time that we treat it like one."

As always, keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities!

Grazing 102 – June 7th and 8th, 2013 at the Southern Indiana Purdue Ag Center, Dubois, Indiana. Contact Jason Tower at towerj@purdue.edu, 812-678-4427 for more information.

Purdue Forage Day – June 21, 2013, Roann, Indiana. There will be more details coming.

Field Day – Tall Grass Rotational Grazing for Dairy Cattle and Grass-fed Cattle Genetics featuring Gearld Fry – July 9th, 2013. For more information contact The Swiss Connection at swissconnectioncheese@gmail.com or call 812-939-2813.

Purdue Forage Management Day – September 5th, 2013, Purdue Agronomy Farm DTC.

GLCI Strategic Plan: http://www.glci.org/assets/GLCIstrategicPlan_Rev_2012_Web_Version.pdf