

Know the Quality of Your Hay

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FORAGE QUALITY IS IMPORTANT. Putting this statement into action is often what separates the best cattle producers from the average ones. Only when we understand that providing adequate nutrition is critical for production can we begin the journey toward profitable cattle farming. One of the situations where focusing on forage quality is important is during winter hay feeding. During this time of the year, the cow is dependent primarily on hay to provide her nutrients. If the hay is poor quality, then her nutrient requirements may not be met, resulting in poor production.

When grazing is available for cattle, they can be selective, grazing the green, leafy portions of the plants in the pasture. Even in what looks like poor quality pasture, if the stocking rate is low enough cattle can consume a good quality diet through this selective grazing. When no grazing is available and hay is put out, there is no opportunity for cattle to be selective. They may reject the part of the bale that is rotten, but their diet will be dependant on the quality of the hay provided to them. Low quality hay without supplementation means a low quality diet for the cattle.

The key is being able to match the nutrient content of the diet to the nutrient requirement of the cattle. To be able to do this, you must know two things: 1) the nutrient needs of the animal and, 2) the quality of the hay.

The nutrient requirement of a cow does not stay the same over the entire year. They increase and decrease, based on her stage of production. During the fall and early winter, spring calving cows have relatively low nutrient requirements. They are not producing milk, so they don't need a lot of protein and energy. A low-medium quality hay can be used efficiently during this time. As the cow gets closer to calving, her requirements begin to increase. This means that a higher quality hay is needed. Different quality hays are needed during different time of the year.

Just as a cows nutrient requirements are not always the same, the quality of all hays are not the same. Forage quality will vary based on the forage species, fertilization, and drying conditions. However, the biggest thing that will influence hay quality is the stage of maturity of the forage when it is cut. If a plant is cut when it is young and leafy, it will be high quality. If cutting is delayed until it gets older and more stemmy, then forage quality will be lower. The goal should be to always cut hay when it is high quality. This is not always possible. Delayed cutting because of rain, or rain damage during drying can cause a reduction in forage quality. The question then becomes whether the hay is good enough for the cow. The only way to know is to have a forage test run. This will show you the amount of protein and energy contained in the hay, and will provide the information necessary to determine if supplements need to be fed to provide a balanced ration to the cow.

A forage test is important for a winter feeding program. Even though visually evaluating hay can give clues as to the quality of hay, there is no way to know without testing. The University of Tennessee has a forage testing laboratory that can analyze hay samples for protein, fiber and energy. Testing a sample from each cutting of hay can help in deciding which cutting to feed at which time of the year. The poorer quality hay should be fed early in the cows gestation, and then as her requirements increase, either supplementation or a higher quality hay can be fed.

Improving your cattle operation means you have to increase your nutrition program. Get the most out of your cows by providing the nutrients they need. Cutting their nutrition means cutting their production. Contact your local Extension office for more information about forage testing. Always keep in mind the quality of the forage that you are feeding your cattle.

Important Date: Nov 7- TN Forage and Grassland Council conference - Nashville