

I'M SLOWLY GOING DOWN

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The other day I changed the oil in my wife's car. Just like I have done many times in my life, I gathered the tools, slide underneath the car and drained the oil, etc. Everything all said and done, it maybe took 30 minutes. No big deal at all. But the next morning I got up and bent over to put on my socks. I literally said "My aching back". I determined that I am not quite as young as I used to be, and crawling on my back underneath the car resulted in this delayed pain. As a young man I was much more able to do this type of thing.

Our forage crops follow a very similar type of pattern. When they are young, they are very high quality, containing lots of protein and energy. But as they get older, their nutrient content begins to decrease and the fiber content goes up. Anytime you see a grass that has a seedhead, or a legume that has a bloom, you automatically know the nutrient content of that plant is beginning to drop.

Often someone will read about a new forage crop and ask if that crop can make good hay. It is important to understand that any grass or legume can make a good hay crop. Or it can make a low quality hay crop. It isn't the species that determines whether it is good or bad, but how young or how old the plants are when they are harvested that determine the quality. Research has shown that there are actually very small differences in the nutrient content between different grass species. If cut early, most species will contain 15-16 percent crude protein. Once they produce a seedhead, the protein content will begin to decrease to below 12 percent, and will drop from there.

Why is this important to understand? Because once you understand that it isn't the plant that controls the quality but the person cutting the field, you can begin to make changes that will improve your hay quality. If you think that tall fescue is low quality so you will get to it later, the low quality hay you produce won't be due to the tall fescue, but due to your management. That is something that you can change.

Your primary key for when to cut hay is a seedhead for grasses and a bloom for legumes. Once you start to see those, you need to be ready to mow a field in short order. Every day you wait will result in a slow loss in protein and energy.

I know what you're thinking – it rains all the time so I can't cut when I want. Granted, rain is an issue for spring hay cutting. But if you understand what is causing the drop in quality, and you know what to look for, you have a better chance of minimizing the impact of rain.