

Ag Column
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Wet Year Will Impact Forage Quality

One of our top agricultural renewable resources is grass. Whether driving on the interstate or on a country road, we have many beautiful views of pastures and hayfields.

With the wet spring and now plentiful rain this summer, our grazing and forage harvest opportunities will likely be good. I am sure glad we have all of those “four-legged bushogs” out there harvesting this grass. That was the term for cattle, horses, and small ruminants that my animal science professor at the University of Tennessee, Dr. Bill Backus, used when I was in school. Without livestock, someone would have to spend time and fuel to mow the fields.

With all of the rain this year, we will likely have a good hay year with a record number of bales, but the quality is likely to be lower due to the wet weather. Producers sure don't want wet and moldy hay in their barn. So, they may delay cutting to get a better weather opportunity, resulting in hay with a lower nutritive value. Hay that lays in the field during a rain may also have a lower nutritive quality even though baled at the right moisture.

It is the livestock manager's responsibility to match the nutrient needs of the animal with the nutrient content of the forage available. For example, you should not be feeding your best hay to your dry cows, ewes, or does. The animal's requirement for forage will change over the course of a year depending on whether she is pregnant and what stage of gestation she is in or if she is producing milk.

Just as the animal's nutrient requirements are not always the same, the quality of all hays are not the same. Dr. Gary Bates, UT Extension Forage Specialist, says the forage quality will vary based on the forage species, fertilization, stage of maturity at harvest, and drying conditions.

The question then becomes whether the hay is good enough for the animal. According to Bates, the only way to know is to have the forage tested. A test 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.

The University of Tennessee has a forage testing laboratory for analyzing hay samples for protein, fiber and energy. Collecting this information for each cutting and or field will help you decide which cutting to feed at which time of the year. Starting with the poorer quality hay in early gestation, you can begin to feed the better hay as the animal gets closer to birthing and afterward until the grass begins to grow in the spring.

Forage testing will allow you to evaluate your hay to feed it as effectively as possible to get the best performance from your livestock.