

May 2017

## HASTENING HAY DRY-DOWN

Does it seem to you that clouds and rain are here just about every other day this spring? Rain obviously is a problem when making hay, but why I'm also talking about clouds. Well, other than rain itself, the most important weather factor that affects rate of hay dry-down is sunlight. Temperature, humidity, soil moisture content, and wind speed all are important, but solar radiation has the greatest impact on drying rate. In fact, research has shown as much as a 10-fold increase in drying rate as solar radiation changes from heavy cloud cover to full sunlight. No other factor affected drying rate even half as much.

So how do you use this information? Obviously, you can't control how much sunlight you receive. But, you can watch weather reports and try to cut hay during sunny weather. Okay – that states the obvious. Another thing you should do, though, is spread your cut hay out in as wide a swath as possible to expose more hay to direct sunlight. This does two things. Sunlight keeps stomates open on the leaves, which is the fastest way for moisture to exit the plant. Stomates in the dark inside or bottom of windrows will close, preventing rapid moisture loss. Wide windrows also enables your hay to absorb as much sun energy as possible to heat and evaporate moisture out of your hay. This may bleach hay more than thick windrows, but fast dry-down usually is more valuable than green color.

Also, mechanically condition your hay and turn it gently after tops get dry to expose moist hay under the swath to hasten dry-down.

Make hay while the sun shines is an old, old saying but today's science has shown how true it really is.

Dr. Bruce Anderson, Extension Forage Specialist  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
314 Keim Hall—East Campus  
Lincoln NE 68583-0915  
402-4742-2577  
[banderson1@unl.edu](mailto:banderson1@unl.edu)

