

PRAIRIE HAY STRATEGIES

When should you cut prairie hay? Let's look at some things to consider.

When is the best time to cut prairie hay? While it's still leafy? When it heads out? After it's done growing for the year?

First let's make sure we all know what I mean by prairie hay. In today's message, I'm talking mostly about warm-season grasses like the bluestems and grammas, indiagrass, switchgrass, lovegrass, or prairie sandreed. There might be some wheatgrass or junegrass or other cool-season species present, but if this field is fully green and growing by mid-April in Nebraska, it's not what I'm calling prairie hay.

One factor to consider when timing harvest of prairie hay is stand persistence. Producer experience and university research both show that prairie hay stands decline rapidly if they are often harvested twice a year. Another factor is hay quality. Prairie hay cut in late June or early July might have over 10 percent protein and 65 percent TDN. But as grass gets older and develops stems and seedheads, its forage quality will decline. If you wait until August to cut, protein might drop down below 5 percent and TDN as low as 45 percent.

Other practical considerations might be your difficulty harvesting all your prairie hay at once and your potential need for both high quality hay for young stock and average quality hay for dry cows.

What I think this means is that most operations should have at least two different prairie hay areas. Harvest one area in late June or early July for high quality and again in October if sufficient regrowth occurs. Harvest the other area just once in early August for high yield. Then switch areas the next year.

Prairie hay is a valuable resource. Extra care can assure long term production of highly useable hay.

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

