

Why? Why? Why?

Why are my replacement heifers and calves so thin? Why did my alfalfa hay test so low? Why? Why? Why? Let's look for some answers to these common questions.

Why this, why that, what's causing things to be different this year? I get these types of questions every year and they are quite common this year, and some are easier to explain than others. For instance, it's not unusual for calf weaning weights and replacement heifer rates of gain to be higher in dry years than in wet years - as long as it wasn't so dry that animals went hungry. Even though the grass is lush and looks excellent, in wet years it also contains more moisture and can be what some people might call "washy". The extra growth that was stimulated by all the moisture tends to dilute the nutrient concentration in the grass. Plus, it tends to pass through the animals more rapidly so some nutrients don't get digested.

Low forage test values for alfalfa hay this spring also might have been caused partly by this same dilution effect. But I think a couple other factors also played an important role. One factor might have been that alfalfa was simply cut later than usual due to all the rain delays. It may not have looked more mature, but it still was older and thus contained extra fiber.

Another issue is slow drying of hay after cutting due to high humidity or cloudy weather. Until alfalfa dries down to less than 50 percent moisture, it continues to burn off nutrients. So, when it takes alfalfa longer to dry down, more desirable nutrients are burned away, leaving behind the less desirable fiber. Plus, cloudy weather reduces the amount of nutrients produced to begin with. Every year is different - some more than others. Sometimes we understand what causes the differences, but sometimes we don't.

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

