

July 15, 2016

PRYOR'S PRAIRIE HAY RECOMMENDATIONS

When should you cut prairie hay? We don't have as many places left as we used to for hay harvest but there can be a little debate about proper timing. Bruce Anderson at UNL gave some good tips on some things to consider. To be fair to Bruce, these are Bruce's prairie hay recommendations.

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?

Prairie Hay is mostly about warm season grasses or native grasses such as bluestems, grama, indiangrass, switchgrass, lovegrass, or prairie sandreed. There might be some wheatgrass, bluegrass or brome or other cool-season species present. If your field is fully green and growing by mid-April in Nebraska, it's not what we call 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 this all means is that to be optimal, 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.

SALINE COUNTY FAIR

It's County Fair time and the heat wave is back too. Our office essentially moves to the Fairgrounds and Tuxedo Park in Crete for a week. I have responsibilities there from Monday, July 18 to Monday, July 25. I will be back in the office Tuesday, July 26. If you need to get ahold of me on something urgent, you can call the fairgrounds office number at 402-826-5106. You can also leave a message at our office at 402-821-2151 if your inquiry can wait until after the fair. Better yet, come to the fair and we will see you there!

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