

HARVEST RUST-INFECTED WHEAT FOR HAY

Wheat fields are turning yellow prematurely across southern Nebraska and into adjoining areas. According to plant pathologists, stripe rust is the culprit. Now what can you do?

Stripe rust can be a devastating disease on wheat and other cereals. It can become widespread on susceptible varieties that have not been sprayed with appropriate fungicides during prolonged periods of wet weather like we have experienced lately.

When the upper most leaf, the flag leaf, becomes heavily infected, grain yield losses can exceed 30 percent. Sometimes adequate grain production may not be feasible. So other options need to be considered.

Baling hay or chopping silage are two potential options. Rust pustules are not toxic to cattle although sometimes the spores can irritate respiration. It can be difficult to make good silage, though. Rusty leaves dry out rapidly so it can be hard to get the best moisture content for silage packing and fermentation.

Usually it is best to harvest rusty wheat hay just before heading to retain reasonable forage quality. As plants mature further, quality can decline rapidly. Digestibility of rust affected cells is much lower than that of normal cells. Fortunately, protein doesn't seem to be affected greatly. Properly made hay should not deteriorate in the bale due to the rust any more than normal.

Be sure to have the forage tested before feeding. It is likely that nutrient concentration will differ from typical wheat hay so testing will help in developing rations.

Also consider the impact of removing the wheat residue. Adequate residue helps retain soil moisture, boosting yield of your next crop.

There never are good choices when problems like this develop. All you can do is weigh your options and chose what is best for you.

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

