
Hay is A-Changing

Take it from an expert on Hay, hay used to be hay. Today all hay is not alike. Let's take a look at special categories in the hay business.

Dairy quality hay used to be judged by the protein content and by the dry matter percentage. Yesterday it was rated on Relative Feed Value (RFV). RFV is a calculated value which takes into account the moisture percentage, and energy digestibility of the forage. Dairy cows need fiber in their diet, and milk production has risen so much that each bite of fiber needs to supply energy for the cow to transform nutrients into milk. RFV values less than 125 are considered to be average quality hay. This would include most prairie, brome, and average quality alfalfa. RFV values from 125 to 150 are good quality hay and would generate an extra \$15 to 20 dollars a ton. RFV greater than 150 are considered top quality dairy hay and would be priced from \$40 to \$70 per ton over average quality hay. Generally this would mean a price range from \$90 to 140 per ton. Alfalfa is about the only forage we produce in quantity which can generate this high an RFV.

Today dairy nutritionists are dusting off the final discussions of Relative Forage Quality, RFQ to replace RFV. RFQ improves the ability of the index value to predict forage digestibility and the resultant milk production. The RFQ index value for top quality hay will also be 150 and higher. The RFQ forage test evaluations include Rumen Un-degraded Crude Protein, Acid Detergent Fiber, Neutral Detergent Fiber Digestibility (NDFD), In Vitro True Digestibility (IVTD), and TDN1X which is an enhanced method to calculate the total digestible nutrients using NDF and protein values. It is all a very complicated way of saying we have a better index to predict how much energy and protein the cow can digest out of a mouthful of hay.

Another market which has emerged is the market for low potassium grass hay. Prairie hay and brome hay tested for potassium level is of interest in the proper management of dry cows in dairy operations. Low testing hay can increase the value of the hay for dairy operators.

We have fared through the winter quite well. The open winter has reduced the pressure on the tight hay supply. Beef producers should be using their better quality hay at this point to help those cows start milk production, recover from calving and get ready to be bred again. Be sure the cow is getting enough protein from the alfalfa hay or vegetable protein source like soybean meal or whole soybeans. You might also want to start feeding some magnesium in the mineral mix to avoid grass tetany which can occur in late springs when new grass comes on quickly. Consult your veterinarian for further information.

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