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SAMPLE AND TEST HAY BEFORE WINTER FEEDING

Correct sampling techniques, followed by lab tests of forage quality, are necessary for cattle producers who want to get the most value from their forages and profit from their animals.

Maybe the most important step in sampling hay, and sometimes the most difficult step, is deciding which bales and stacks should be included in each sample. Ideally, each sample should include only bales that were produced under nearly identical conditions.

Obviously, the place to start grouping is to separate different types of hay, like alfalfa or CRP or corn stalk or meadow hay. But each cutting of hay probably is different from the other cuttings also, so there is another separation. And no two fields or meadows are ever exactly the same, especially if they were cut more than two days apart, so that makes another grouping. And what if part of the field was rained on before it was baled? The hay made without rain damage probably will be different from hay with rain damage.

After you've made all these separations, which could result in quite a few groups of similar bales, then and only then are you ready to sample. From each group gather a dozen or more cores from different bales or stacks and combine them into one sample. Be sure to use a good hay probe that can core into at least one foot of the bale.

Finally, send these samples to a certified lab for tests of energy content and protein, maybe nitrates, and any other nutrients of interest to you.

Then use this information to feed your cattle as profitably as possible.

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

