

QUALITY ALFALFA
WHAT IS IT AND WHAT IS IT WORTH TO THE DAIRYMAN?

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My opinions on alfalfa hay are the opinions of a commercial dairy operator. I try to obtain the maximum pounds of milk our cows are capable of producing. Alfalfa hay is always used in the rations, but the amount fed is determined by the cost relationship to other available feeds for obtaining a balanced ration, capable of supporting peak levels of production.

The following questions are the most frequently asked and the answers are based on my 20 years experience on feeding and buying hay.

1. Question: What do you consider to be high quality hay?

Answer: High quality hay to me would have a minimum 55% TDN, 21% protein, have bright green color and be palatable. I prefer 57-59% TDN with 24-25% protein.

2. Question: Can lower quality hay be utilized?

Answer: I try to obtain high quality hay always for the milking cows and every year we end up with some hay that was purchased as top hay but upon analysis will not meet my minimums for the higher producing strings of cows. This hay then will be fed to lower producing strings or young stock. I would consider this hay to be of medium quality from 50-54% TDN and 19-20% protein. Even though this hay was visually inspected and thought to be top quality, it will not support maximum levels of milk flow.

I hope not to have hay under 50% TDN and 18% protein on the dairy, but if we do end up with this lower quality hay, it has to be fed. This hay will be fed to non-milking stock and at times supplemented as the situation may warrant.

3. Question: How to evaluate quality?

Answer: To determine quality, high or low, it takes three steps:

1. Visual inspection.
Analyses by a competent lab on samples obtained in a standardized manner.
3. Palatability - if the cows don't like it or roll it, then I call it poor quality.

4. Question: What does high quality do in terms of milk production?

Answer: "The cows milk production is limited only by her inherited ability to produce, the amount of feed she can eat and drink and her managements mistakes." If inherited genetic ability and management duties are taken care of, then the only restricting factor is feed. Milk flow and milk composition will be directly related to the nutritional and energy values of the total amount of feed she was given. Therefore, high quality alfalfa gets more milk than lower quality if other things are equal.

5. Question: What price to insure high quality?

Answer: During the early cuttings, when most of the higher quality alfalfa is produced, it appears that everyone only has hay in the No. 1 grade price range, or close to it, although visual inspection shows otherwise many times.

Certainly if I can test the hay before it is bought, then the price could be more in proportion to the quality, but many times the offer would be less than the usually already asked No. 1 grade top-of-the-market price.

Analyses of hay can usually be accomplished in two to three days from sample taking to results. Shrink must be taken into consideration if hay is not moved in a reasonable time. At the present time, because of demand and high price, most growers do not care to hold their hay for testing before sale.

We have tested our purchased hay for many years and now attempt to purchase the hay from farmers whose hay consistently tests in acceptable ranges. The top prices are paid to the farmers who have, by their own practices and reputation, developed a confidence that quality hay will be the result if possible or a satisfactory adjustment will be made.

Summary

Quality hay is worth more. Most dairymen pay more for it. Hay is the major expense in most dairy budgets and even efficient dairymen are hard pressed to handle their hay buying in a more businesslike manner. The laboratory analysis is one of the most useful tools in determining alfalfa quality but, due to the "chance of human error" because of the number of persons involved in this procedure, I use the results only as a management tool and not as the sole criteria for determining price.

Quality alfalfa hay is the single, most important ingredient in the high producing cows ration and high producing cows are the way to survival in the dairy business.