

BUD-STAGE ALFALFA FOR THE FARMER AND FOR THE DAIRYMAN

Donald Giacomazzi
Kings County Farmer and Dairyman

Since I am both a farmer and a dairyman, I have been asked to look at this question of quality alfalfa hay from both sides: (1) Can I afford to produce it for the extra cost? And, (2) As a dairyman, can I afford to pay the extra price this alfalfa should bring?

I was pretty uneasy about being on this panel at first, even though I am a Giacomazzi. (A Swiss-Italian packs around more than his fair share of ego, and there aren't many situations we can't bluff our way through!) But after I talked with some of the Kings County farm advisors, I began to feel a little easier about my assignment. I found that the questions to be answered are basically economic ones. And I found that before an economist answers any question, he draws up a list of assumptions. If he reaches the conclusion that it is going to be a great year for a certain commodity, and the market goes to pieces for that commodity, all he has to do to save his neck is point out that one of his assumptions failed to develop and he is home safe.

So, first I set up a group of assumptions. The first and most important of these was that whether I gear up to produce bud-stage alfalfa hay, or whether I cut at a longer interval and produce No. 2 Leafy, it is not going to make any difference to any heavenly deity that my decision, one way or the other, isn't going to call forth a plague of locusts, some new pestilence, or a heavy thunderstorm completely out of season. This gets me off the hook right there. Because, while the Swiss-Italians were granted a birthright of magnificent egos, they have paid for it by being the first victims of any bad temper of the gods.

Here are a few of the other assumptions that started with: If I grow bud-stage hay, my stand will last two years against four years if I extend the period between cuttings to 32-33 days.

I didn't bother to chalk up all the costs of production for both situations, but only those that make a difference.

Kern County farm advisors are the only ones in the area who put together sample hay costs in 1976. They show the cost to establish a stand as \$158.35. With a two-year stand the annual depreciation is half of this, or \$79.18. With a longer cutting interval and a four-year stand, annual depreciation halves again to \$39.59.

Otherwise, per acre growing costs are about the same. I assumed that they are, except for swathing and turning at harvest. There were 12 cuttings on a 26-28 day schedule in the two years. On the 32-33 day schedule I had 27 cuttings in four years. This gave an average annual yield of 6.8 tons on the bud-stage schedule, 8.8 tons on the 32-33 day schedule.

Baling and roadsiding are paid for on a tonnage basis and I took this into consideration. But these are the only costs I used: stand depreciation, swathing, turning, baling and roadsiding. Other costs should be the same on either schedule.

The total of these costs for the early cut was \$421.46 for 13.65 tons of hay or \$30.88 per ton. With the later cut, total costs were \$813.73, but in four years the yield was 35.24 tons, or \$23.09 per ton. In other words, to produce the top quality hay my costs per ton were \$7.79 more.

Now, we have to look at the other side of the coin. Is it worth \$7.79 more to me as a dairyman to feed my cows this better quality hay?

The easy way to answer this should be to look at the Federal-State Hay Market News. But back in May in the Hanford-Tulare area, No. 1, roadsided was quoted at \$81.00, while No. 2 Leafy was listed at \$78.00--only a \$3.00 difference. If the figures I gave a few minutes ago were in the ball park, with almost a \$7.80 higher cost, I would take a real beating as a farmer if I had decided to produce top quality hay.

Right now there is no listing for No. 1 hay on the local market. But Los Angeles shows a \$10.00 difference, with No. 1 at \$82.00 and No. 2 Leafy at \$72.00. With this spread, as a farmer, I should be interested in getting into quality hay production

But what can I as a dairyman afford to pay for this difference in quality? This gets to be a pretty tough question to answer. You can't just ask yourself, "How much more No. 2 Leafy will I have to feed in order to get the same amount of protein and net energy into my cows compared with No. 1 hay?" The question is hard to answer because a cow, even with four stomachs, can hold just so much feed. You can go only so far even with the best hay. Then, if you have good cows you have to start substituting concentrates--feed like barley and cottonseed meal--to get that extra milk out of the creatures.

I took my average cow, figured she could eat 50 pounds of dry feed, and calculated that she would need 3.54 pounds of digestible protein and 30.37 pounds of net energy daily. If I feed the lower quality hay in combination with corn silage, I would have to feed almost 25 pounds of concentrates. But with better quality hay, I would need to feed 2.5 pounds less of concentrates, and I could feed more of the lower-cost silage combined with the better hay.

With barley quoted on the Los Angeles market at \$122.00 and cottonseed meal at \$175.00 per ton, I could afford to pay \$12.40 a ton more for top quality hay. Not only is there more energy in this hay, but the energy seems to be due mostly to its richer protein content. So my concentrate needs less of the protein-rich cottonseed meal--at \$175.00 per ton. In my situation, it looks as if, even with the present spread of \$10.00 per ton between No. 1 hay and No. 2 Leafy, I could pay that price. The farmer could make a few extra bucks, and we would both be better off.