

News Article

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The Importance of Testing Hay

Most farmers I've interacted with would like to forget the spring of 2019. Extended wet conditions delayed crop planting and first-cutting hay harvests significantly past prime harvest time.

For livestock producers, good hay is hard to come by, and it is expensive. Producers are making due with what they have available, for the most part.

But, do you really know what you have, nutritionally?

Dr. Keith Johnson, Purdue Extension forage specialist, reported last fall that forage quality was impacted in a big way by the weather in 2019. He encouraged producers to properly sample forages, have samples tested in a laboratory, allocate better forages to lactating animals, and to balance rations after knowing your forage testing results. (See Johnson's full article in the Sept. 13, 2019 issue of *Purdue Pest and Crop* newsletter at: <https://extension.entm.purdue.edu/newsletters/pestandcrop/past-issues/>).

If you have not gotten around to testing your hay for nutrient contents and your livestock just don't seem to be performing well, it may benefit you to test now and supplement deficient nutrients.

To obtain a good representative sample of your hay, it's best to use a hay probe. 20 random core samples from a cutting of hay should be taken for one composite sample. Several county Purdue Extension offices have hay probes that you may be able to borrow, or work with the Extension Educator to help sample your hay. The Whitley County Extension office is one such office.

When asked about the impacts of feeding poor quality hay to beef cows, ewes and does, Nick Minton, Purdue Extension beef systems specialist, said, "The most concerning thing to me is reduced dry matter intake, or reduced nutrient intake." He said any time we limit nutrient intake beyond the animal's requirements, we run the risk of causing weight loss, reduced milk production, and weak offspring from poor nutrient transfer in-utero or from suppressed milk production. "We can also have poor conception rates and have more open cows within the herd," he said.

"The good news is that we can prevent these problems with proper sampling of the hay, testing it in a laboratory, allocating the hay to the right stage of production, and adding supplements to meet needs that the hay does not," said Johnson.

“Preferably, samples should be sent to labs that are certified with the National Forage Testing Association,” said Minton. He said that fortunately for us, we have two of those labs in-state: A&L Great Lakes Laboratories in Fort Wayne, and SureTech Laboratories in Indianapolis.”

“Once you have your analysis, you should seek the help of a trained nutritionist,” said Minton. “The nutritionist is going to allocate the different hay tests to the right class of livestock, as lactating animals require high quality hay as compared to animals in mid-gestation.” He said that they’re also going to recommend a least-cost supplement option to meet the protein and energy requirements.

The Purdue Extension specialists recommended testing forages every year as a best-management practice.

Suggestions for proper hay sampling techniques can be found at:

<https://www.agry.purdue.edu/ext/forages/publications/ID-172.htm>. Johnson invited producers to contact him with questions at 765-494-4800 or at johnsonk@purdue.edu.