Purchasing Hay???

There is a country song that says “rain makes grain...” which is true, but for graziers our focus is “rain makes forage”, something most of the region has experienced this year. Stored forage is part of nearly every ruminant livestock operation and in the past couple years it has come with increased cost. Fortunately, the trend of lower hay production and inventory in the major hay producing states appears to have reversed in 2024. However, the rain has created challenges with timely and proper harvest of hay. If you need to purchase hay to fill a forage gap this winter, there are some risks that need to be considered.

Most of the time, purchased hay is hauled in and fed without issue. Often times some of the best times to purchase this feed is directly out of the field from a known, local supplier. It’s a regular occurrence for many operations and should always be an option for consideration in the overall livestock feeding plan. Price tends to be a major driver of purchasing decisions, but there are additional costs that purchased hay can bring to an operation.

Not all hay is created equal. Sellers can make any claim about the quality of the hay, but the only way to truly know is to have a good representative forage quality analysis test. Many factors go into hay quality; plant maturity, species present, fertilization, moisture during the growing season, and how the hay was cured and put up are just a few. Even if a good guess of quality is close, a few percentage points either way on energy or protein content can mean the difference between good body condition, healthy calving and a successful breed back or not. Not only does a hay test provide a better understanding of what quality of product you are purchasing, it can help with finding the best deal when comparing options.

Don’t forget to consider toxicity issues when purchasing forages. Small grains and annual forage grasses and some weedy species like pigweed are of especially high concern for nitrates. A forage nitrate test can quickly tell if there is a problem or not and is something to ask for before purchase. Hay that was put up in a hurry may not have been dried and cured properly. Wet hay often leads to mold growth. Besides lowering the quality of feed, mold can cause respiratory issues and in some cases mycotoxin development. While not every mycotoxin is the same, consumption can lead to lowered gain and in extreme cases abortion and/or death. Horses tend to be very sensitive to moldy hay.

Invasive species in the form of weeds and insects can be a concern as well. Ask questions about problem species in the area where the forage is harvested and ask for assurance that the forage is free of these issues. Reserve the right to refuse the hay after inspection upon arrival. When feeding hay of unknown source, do it in a small area, so if a problem does develop it is isolated and hopefully, controllable. Weedy hay may contain plants that are toxic to livestock. Since hay is a dried form of the plant and often limit fed or ground, animals can end up consuming more of these problem plants or insects. Keep an eye out for anything unusual in the bales and try to identify unknown plants or insects if possible.

Most producers have a good handle on how much quantity is needed to make it through a normal winter. Hopefully planning already takes into consideration a worst-case weather scenario, but if not, it’s worth considering. What happens in an early winter with grazing days cut short? What about a cold dry spring and a late green up? Don’t forget the quality side of the equation. Does the hay inventory have the quality to cover animal nutritional requirements? What if an extended cold snap occurs and animal energy demands increase dramatically? By being prepared, purchased hay doesn’t have to come with an additional cost.