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Thoughts on the Hay Crop

By the time you read this I am hopeful of having several round bales rolled up. I started cutting hay Thursday night with the forecast for the weekend being favorable. I realize some of you had much more rain, and hail, on Wednesday night (May 21), but the gauge only had 2 tenths of an inch where I am on Thursday morning.

I have traveled in recent days from north and east of Chillicothe, into northern Adams and southeastern Highland counties, as well as into Mason and Fleming Counties in Kentucky. The entire region appears to have some of the same issues when it comes to hay production, it is ready to cut regardless of the fact it is not super thick or very tall in most fields. Most farmers I have talked to about their hay fields are not thinking it looks very good.

So, there is not lots of hay in the field, now what do you do? I am sure there are several schools of thought on this, but here is one to think about. First of all, once that plant goes to producing seed that is what it puts nearly all of its energy into, so additional growth is not there. That plant is finished growing and maturing by producing the seed. Unless you are planning on harvesting seed, why wait? I have heard farmers say they are waiting on the undergrowth before. While waiting on undergrowth, the mature plant that has already produced seed is dying. It will soon start to lose some of the green color and eventually turn brown. As that takes place from this point on, that plant is losing nutritional value. OK, so back to, now what do you do?

It is not the easiest answer, especially when it comes to time and labor, or even cost of fuel, but make that first cutting now. As soon as the weather permits, harvest the first cutting and get it off the field so the plants can start over. The quantity of hay that you put in a bale will be less than normal in most cases, but it should be of pretty good quality if it is cut before the plants mature, even more for plants like orchardgrass. Some later maturing varieties and timothy are not there yet, but much of the fescue and orchardgrass are ready, and have been for a few days. If the first cutting is removed early, the plant still has time to hopefully benefit from early season rains for the summer months and possibly utilize some of the fertilizer that the first cutting didn't, so there's a good second cutting.

I will warn you about cutting the hay early when it is less coarse and better feed, livestock like it better. They will eat more if you let them. This may be an opportunity to feed some high quality hay with some lesser quality hay that you have left over, or that you harvest later. Be sure to record where the better hay is and feed it accordingly. Use the better hay when animal requirements for nutrition are higher.

When you store your hay, there are some fairly simple things that can be done to help save more of it from loss before you feed it. The ideal situation would be to store the hay under roof. This may not fit your situation. Covering it with tarps might help some, but they can be a challenge to keep in place. Maybe the easiest and cheapest way to reduce loss would be where you stack the hay if it has to be stacked outside. Avoid stacking it along wooded areas that shade the sun from drying the surface after a rain. Avoid stacking the hay in areas where the water will pool around it. Stack the hay on a high area so water runs away from it. Even then water tends to run off of the bale and concentrate near the bottom of the bale. The use of gravel or something else that will let the water get away from the bale may help even more.

I mention the storage part with this article because it is important to get those first cutting round bales off of the field as soon as possible so the second cutting possibility has a better chance. Keep in mind that hay does go through a sweat, and storage decisions should be based on the condition of the hay when it is put in a bale. Hay that may be marginal for too much moisture can cause problems from moldy hay, to barn fires, so keep this in mind as you harvest and store the hay crop.

If the weather permits and you are able to get all of your hay in a bale early while there is still high quality to the forage, be sure to pull some samples later on. This is another reason to keep record of how you store the hay. For around \$20 per sample you can find out what nutritional value of the feed you are providing your livestock has. This will allow you to supplement if needed. It may also give you the opportunity to measure the quality of the earliest fields harvested compared the latest fields harvested. The protein, energy and feed values should be quite different in these comparisons. A couple of years ago I cut a field in strips over a month's period of time on almost a weekly interval starting the last week of May and going into late June. I had this hay tested and the protein declined a percentage point or more each week. So if it started out at 10 percent crude protein, by the end of June it was below 6 percent. The energy decreased at a similar rate. By the second strip that was harvested in early June the nutritional value was not sufficient for dry cows without supplementing additional feed.

If you would like to pull samples, I have a probe to pull samples from round bales. Contact me at the OSU Extension Office in Adams, Brown or Highland County. You can also contact me by phone at (937) 515-2314 or by e-mail at Dugan.46@osu.edu

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Dates to Remember

June 9 Pesticide Testing at Old Y Restaurant at Noon. You must pre-register at <http://pested.osu.edu> or by calling ODA at 800-282-1955.

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