HAY: Get The Most From Grass Forages

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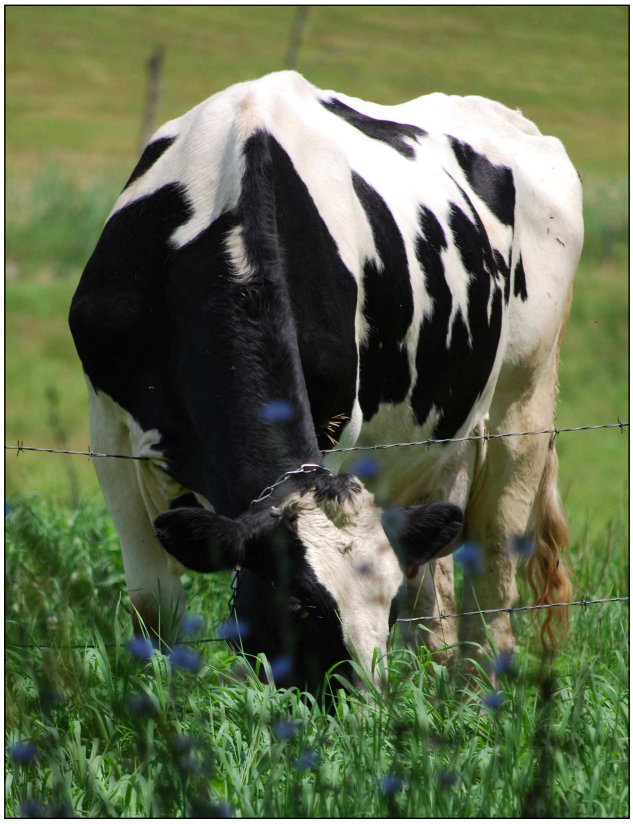

Do you take your grass for granted? Do you pass by green fields day after day without considering how the grass growing there could best benefit your cattle? It might be time to rethink your approach.

With a little extra care, farmers in the northeast are producing grass haylage with a relative forage quality (RFQ) of 160 and higher.

Agri-Basics nutritionist Herb Bonnice, who covers territory in northern Pennsylvania along the New York border, has farmers who are routinely growing grass with an RFQ around 180.

These higher RFQ scores can result in higher milk production when utilized with a properly designed ration. For example, one of Bonnice's clients had grass haylage with an RFQ of 180 last year. His milk production from that haylage was 3,207 pounds of milk per ton of dry matter.

Paul Sirois, manager of the Dairy One Forage Testing Laboratory in Ithaca, New York, said a typical grass haylage RFQ is about 133, putting milk per ton of dry matter at 2,533 pounds. The milk production formula is based on the crude protein, neutral detergent fiber (NDF), fat, ash, non-structural carbohydrates (NFC) and the projected 48-hour digestibility of the haylage.

Milk production per ton of dry matter of 3,207 pounds is fairly close to the numbers farmers in Bonnice's territory post for corn silage. While the starch content is not as high, the feed value and digestibility are very similar, he says. High quality grass haylage has long been the norm out West as well as in Europe. In this part of the country, however, grass still tends to be easily overlooked in favor of its high maintenance cousin, alfalfa.

"Here in the Northeast, we have to change our mindset and realize that we can make good grass," says Sirois. He and his staff provide testing services for many Agri-Basics clients. **Requests for forage testing are increasing despite the downturn in the current farm economy.**

"I think it's because people are realizing they have to squeeze every dollar they can out of their feed," Sirois explains. "Having knowledge about your home-grown forages is the best place to start."

The work begins even before the grass starts growing. Bonnice advises applications of straight urea to grass fields as soon as farmers can get on their ground. The next step is to have your equipment ready to go. Early warm weather coupled with spring rains can give grass a real growth spurt. Once it's ready "we need to get out there and get it down because the nutritional value declines very rapidly once growth peaks," Bonnice says.

Farmers who aren't ready when their grass is ready to harvest for the first time can put themselves behind for the entire growing season. When at all possible, Bonnice believes the first crop of haylage should be harvested by the middle of May. Under optimum weather conditions, these same fields can be harvested as many as four more times. Farmers who start late may miss one or more of those later cuttings.

Sirois says the key is to harvest grass in the "boot" stage, when both palatability and digestibility are high. "You want to manage your grass by stage of maturity," he emphasizes. "If you wait until it heads out, it's not overly mature at that point but it is a fairly advanced stage of maturity. You're going to get great yields but your quality will be less."

A number of studies have shown that grass benefits from wide-swath cuttings of 90 percent or more. Wide-swath cutting allows the haylage to dry enough to be harvested and baled or stored in one day. Plants laying in wide-swaths do not lose as much sugar, which allows them to ensile faster and better, according to a Northern New York Agricultural Development Program study conducted in 2006. Unlike alfalfa, there is no danger of leaf-loss in wide swath cutting of grass.

Once the first cutting of grass haylage has been made, Bonnice counsels his clients to return to their fields with liquid manure. **Cattle and even hog manure have been applied with great success.** Orchard grass, timothy and reed canary grass can all benefit from heavier manure applications than alfalfa, Bonnice notes. In another variation from alfalfa, grass typically performs well in heavier soils that retain a lower ph

Last, but not least, is weed control. **Stands that have become weedy can be replaced with corn for a year or two, reseeded and started again.** Like all high quality forages, high quality grass haylage encourages the cow to eat more and produce more milk while reducing other associated feed costs. "A grass stand that is managed correctly can last many years," Bonnice says.

Topsy Turvy Weather

by By Janet B. Fallon, CCA
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To say that the weather has been all over the place this spring would be an understatement. Central NY, and much of the northeast, has experienced a much earlier than normal spring.

Forsythia bloomed several weeks early as did daffodils and lilacs. Many farmers are ahead of the game when it comes to manure applications and getting corn planted. Nate Herendeen, a retired extension agent turned crop consultant from western NY reports that that's not all that is ahead of schedule as alfalfa weevil are making their presence known as are cereal leaf beetles.

Nate went on to report that alfalfa will be ready to harvest by May 10, a full 3 weeks earlier than normal but hey….what is normal? Just last week we experienced snow flakes on one day and 80 degree temperatures on another. A bit further north of us and into Vermont, there were accumulations of 10 - 15 inches of snow!

Nate's observations raise some difficult questions. What should you do if your alfalfa is ready to harvest but you still have corn to plant? What will make the most sense (or is that dollars and cents) in a topsy turvy year like this?

As you know, there are no "easy answers" to this dilemma. Optimum yield and quality will occur when corn is planted on a timely basis ("timely" depends on your location). An old rule of thumb was to have 60 percent of your corn planted by the optimum planting date for your location since the yield lost by planting too early was less than for planting an equal period too late. That meant shooting for about 10% of your corn acres planted 3 weeks early, about 25% planted about 2 weeks early, 25% planted a week early and so on. Staggering the planting dates also spreads the risk of unfavorable weather at the critical silking time as well as staggering the work load at harvest.

In a typical year, northeast growers can expect to lose about 1 ton of corn silage for each week delay in planting after mid-May. That said, corn can still produce reasonable forage yield and quality most years even when planted in early to mid-June. Most years, that means that the majority of the corn is planted and sprouting by the time alfalfa and alfalfa grass stands are ready to harvest.

Alfalfa on the other hand, will lose quality and feed value very rapidly…..it will not wait for man or beast! In a perfect world, we should take our first alfalfa harvest at bud stage (or shoot for 40% NDF if you prefer to base your decision on fiber levels) with subsequent harvests every 28 to 35 days depending on the growing season. Scissors cut programs are available in many areas so it is a good idea to pay close attention to the growth stage and quality of forages being reported and plan accordingly, especially this year.

This is a year where you can forget about scheduling alfalfa harvest by the calendar date. You will have to make that decision based on the stage of growth, quality (based on scissors cut results or PEAQ stick), window of opportunity (weather) and labor considerations. That might mean taking a break from corn planting to capture the hay crop at optimum quality. Mike Allen at Michigan State University agrees that it usually pays to stop planting corn to harvest alfalfa, particularly for high producing herds. Alfalfa will not wait for you or your high producing cows. If you have the weather to harvest the alfalfa, then that's probably what you should do.

Since there is nothing we can do about the strange weather and growth patterns, we may as well look at the glass as half full rather than half empty……..better yet, let's look at the glass as completely full (of milk) and go harvest that unruly alfalfa!