

It's Time to Get Your Forages Tested

What a summer we had in Missouri. The rain was plentiful, the temperatures not too hot and the growing conditions perfect for forages and field crops. However, the weekly rains caused problems for harvesting hay. The hay was harvested late and/or rained on during the drying time. Another factor regarding forage quality is the abundant forage production that has occurred this year. Typically, when forage quantity is high, the forage quality is lower. Many of the Fall 2008 hay tests reveal that the hay is low in energy and protein. So it is strongly recommended to have your forages tested for quality.

Would you buy a bag of feed or supplement for your cattle without knowing what the nutrient content of the feedstuff is? Probably not. Most producers want to know the energy content and protein content of their feedstuff before they purchase it to feed their cattle. However, when it comes to feeding their cattle with their harvested or bought hay, they do not know or want to know what the nutritional content of the hay that they are feeding. With testing your hay, you are getting the feed tag that comes with the bag of supplement.

By having your hay tested, you will know exactly how good (or how bad) your hay really is. Unlike products bought at the store, hay does not have a nutritional tag listing the percent nutrient requirements. Hay contains specific nutrients needed for proper nutrition, but the question is how much and what nutrients. Hay quality can vary greatly from cutting to cutting and field to field. Testing forage allows for the producer to compensate for deficiencies by offering supplements to their cattle and avoiding nutritional wrecks of having open cows, weak calf syndrome, etc. In addition, if your hay is high quality you won't have to feed your cows that expensive supplement that you had planned on doing this winter.

To do a hay test, gather a representative sample of your hay using about 15 bales per hay sample for each cutting. Use a coring device to get a true sample from each bale. Some feed companies offer hay testing as a service for their customers or University Extension can assist by providing a hay probe, sending the hay sample for testing and interpreting the results. Once you have the test completed, you can make a more informed decision on the livestock nutritional program this winter.

With forage testing, you will no longer have to guess whether your cattle are getting the right nutrients in the proper amounts. But remember, the hay test is only as good as the hay sample. If you have any questions, please contact David Hoffman, Regional Livestock Specialist at your Cass County University of Missouri Extension Center at 816-380-8460 or hoffmand@missouri.edu.