

What's in your hay?

Three reasons to conduct a forage analysis this year...and every year for that matter

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Before we know it, leaves will be changing color and we'll be on the lookout for the first frost of the year. But for now, cooler nights and dew that hangs around for longer and longer every day signifies that change is coming. This change is more than just a turning of the page to another season. As beef cattle producers, one of the major changes will be the way we manage our cattle. Or, more specifically, the way we feed them. Focusing on pasture and grazing management is undoubtedly one of the most economical means of extending the grazing season and decreasing hay feeding requirements. But for most of us, feeding some amount of hay or another harvested roughage is and will likely always be a necessary component of winter feeding programs. Unfortunately, we rarely have a good understanding of the nutrient content – what we'll refer to as “quality” – of our hay. Here are three reasons why conducting a forage analysis can be a valuable practice for your operation.

Reason 1 – Would you rather be proactive by preventing a problem, or reactive to that problem by managing the fallout? I receive quite a few emails and phone calls toward the end of the winter that go something along the lines of...*“It turns out my hay wasn't quite as good as I thought it was. Now my cows are going into the calving season in a poor state of body condition (i.e. they're skinny) and I've had quite a few week calves. They can't seem to keep themselves warm, and I've already lost a few. What can we do to fix it?”* If we could turn back the clock, test the hay, and develop a supplementation program that fills the energy and protein void, this wouldn't be an issue. But we can't do that. Conducting a forage analysis prior to the onset of the winter feeding season allows you to identify an issue with forage quality on the front-end. You can then put the analysis results to use by working with your county Extension agent or nutritionist to implement an economical supplementation strategy that will prevent an issue caused by lower than expected forage quality.

Reason 2 – How good are you at visually evaluating forage quality? I realize the majority of us (myself included), will probably answer that question with “really good.” Unfortunately most of us (again, myself included) aren't quite as good at evaluating forage quality as we think we are. Can we look at a “premium”-type second- or third-cutting mixed cool season grass hay and recognize that it's likely higher in energy and protein content than a first-cutting that was baled in July? Absolutely. But within the range of most “cow hay,” that visual appraisal is often misleading, and the analysis results that follow are often disappointing. They're disappointing in that they serve as proof that our guesstimate wasn't as close as we thought it was, and what we ranked highest, may actually be lowest in terms of energy and protein content. And to follow suit, that guesstimate often causes what we thought we were getting a good buy on as “cheap” hay to become “expensive” hay. It becomes expensive hay because the combined cost of the hay

and supplemental feeds that it requires is greater than what paying a little more for higher quality hay would have been. Conducting a forage analysis to provide an impartial and objective evaluation of forage quality is a good investment for any beef cattle producer. When put to use, it can be a valuable tool to decrease feed costs. Speaking of costs...

Reason 3 – How much does it cost? It's actually quite cheap. Scratch that. It's actually quite economical. I prefer the latter as I feel that there's a considerable difference between the two. Economical does a much better job of reflecting its value. Conducting a forage analysis through the UT Soil, Plant, and Pest Center, which is offered in cooperation with the UT Beef and Forage Center (www.utbeef.com), costs between \$17.00 and \$30.00 per sample. What else can you do for \$30.00 that has the potential to have a substantial impact on your entire herd? If we're talking about a ~30 cow herd, maybe give a blackleg vaccination (which I highly recommend). If we're talking about a larger herd than that, I honestly can't think of anything. It costs us more to put in ear tags (which I also highly recommend). But rather than focusing on how much conducting a forage analysis costs, how much could not conducting one cost you?

Aside from the nutritional impact on your herd, conducting a forage analysis can play a crucial role in evaluating your hay production practices. Think of it as a quality assurance test. And if you're buying your hay, it's an equally valuable tool that can be used to estimate the value of your purchase, or preferably, potential purchase. What I mean by that is having access to forage analysis results on hay before making a purchase can help you to keep that "cheap" hay from turning into "expensive" hay. These are just a few of the reasons why I HIGHLY RECOMMEND conducting a forage analysis, and making it a part of your normal management program. For more information on the topic, contact your county Extension agent or nutritionist, or visit <https://ag.tennessee.edu/spp/Pages/forage.aspx>.