

HAY IN A POKE

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The expression “buying a pig in a poke” is one of many that we’ve all grown up with but not really known what it meant. This expression dates back to the Middle Ages when meat was scarce and folks often bought a pig in a poke (bag) only to find out later that there was a dog or a cat in the bag rather than a pig. In case you haven’t noticed, we have just as many charlatans these days. To keep you from buying hay in a poke, here are some key steps to take.

Don’t Buy Problems

When you haven’t produced the hay, you likely won’t know much about what might be hiding in those bales. High nitrates is a common problem in a drought year. In the past two years, about 15% of the hay samples that have come through our Forage Lab at UGA have nitrate levels that exceed 4500 ppm (above which can poison some classes of beef cattle). This is just one of many good reasons to insist upon a forage test.

Hay brought onto your farm can also carry invasive weeds. Even if the hay has been sprayed, the producer may have used ineffective herbicides.

Similarly, they may have used herbicides that have a long residual life [e.g., picloram (Grazon) or aminopyralid (Milestone, ForeFront, etc.)]. These herbicides may hamper or eliminate the germination and growth of legumes or other plantings that may be made in the area where the hay was fed. So, it is important to ask your hay provider about their weed control practices.

Occasionally, hay may also have poisonous weeds, toxic mold, or other anti-quality factors. Again, it is important to talk with your hay provider about their management practices and to examine the hay lot before you purchase the hay. If they don’t know or act a little dodgy when you ask the questions, it is better to look elsewhere.

Know the Weight of the Bales

This is arguably the most important issue. Bales should always be bought on a “per-ton” basis. If the hay seller claims the bales weigh 1000 lbs, ask them how they know. Many producers think they are making 1000 lb rolls because “the baler’s manual says so.” Unfortunately, bales rarely weigh what the baler’s manual says it will. Of course, the only sure way to know is to weigh them. In fact, it is important to weigh several of them to get an average. Even bales from the same field baled with the same baler can vary by 10-15%. If there are no scales available on the farm that can weigh large rolls, run a truckload of bales over the scales at a truck stop. Though there is a charge, you will be able to calculate an average bale weight and how much the hay costs on a “per ton” basis. This will also help you to better understand the transportation costs on a “per ton” basis, as well. If weighing the bales is not an option, estimate the bale’s weight assuming 9 - 12 lbs of DM per cubic foot. A cheatsheet for this is available here: <http://www.caes.uga.edu/commodities/fieldcrops/forages/pubs/BaleWeightEstimationTable.pdf>.

Know the Moisture of the Bales

All hay has some amount of moisture in it. The standard hay moisture is 15% (that is, the hay has 15 lbs of water for every 100 lbs of total weight). However, hay moisture may be as low as 8% or higher than 20%. All else being equal, it would be wise to purchase hay lots with lower moisture levels.

Look for the Right Hay Quality

Yes, the quality of hay that you need is available. But, there are still many who have no idea what forage quality means, much less do appropriate sampling to assess it. You may have to ask for a forage test or insist on sampling it so that you can determine if it is what you need. Certainly, there are some folks who will get offended when you ask to see the results of a forage test. However, you should consider this to be a dealbreaker. A tremendous amount of money can

be made or lost on this decision. Remember, you are fundamentally buying digestible energy and protein. Be sure you know what you are buying.

Note How the Hay was Stored

Hay that has been stored outside without any protection may have a weathered layer that the cows won't eat. This weathered layer commonly represents a waste of over 25% of the bale's volume. To get the most hay for your money, only buy hay that has been stored inside or under cover.

Figure Out How Much You Need

Most livestock consume about 2% of their body weight per head everyday. So, a typical 1200 lb cow will need 24 lbs of dry hay per day. A good rule of thumb is to allow for one 1000-lb. hay bale per cow per month. If the hay is stored outside or the bales are fed without any protection (hay ring, etc.), the amount of hay required will increase by 10 - 30% to account for increased intake and feeding and storage losses. If you are really stretching out your hay or allowing the animals to graze for substantial amounts of their forage, then you should be able to make do with at least 10 - 30% less.

For more information on these and other forage management subjects, check out our website at www.georgiaforages.com or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office at 1- 800-ASK-UGA1.