

CHEAP HAY IS EXPENSIVE

February 2008 Georgia Cattleman
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Yes, that title is stating the obvious, isn't it? If you can find any "cheap" hay, it will be very expensive this year. But, the costs associated with "cheap" hay are not necessarily what you pay for it on a "per bale" or even "dry ton" basis. To truly understand the cost of "cheap" hay, the cattleman must account for how the quality of the hay matches the needs of their animals and, if necessary, how much it will cost to supplement it. To illustrate this, let's go through a couple real-world scenarios (fresh off my desk).

First, let's address an extreme example. (Unfortunately, I have already had numerous reports of this problem this year.) Suppose you find some summer annual hay two counties over that's available for a bargain-basement price of \$35 per roll. You buy a truckload, start feeding some, and a short time later find a couple cows laying dead. As it turns out, that hay had a toxic level of nitrates. It doesn't take a calculator to figure out that that lot of "cheap" hay was VERY expensive.

The last two scenarios are less extreme, but still potentially costly. Here is the background. Let's say you are deciding between two hay lots. One lot (A) is priced at \$65 per roll, while the other (B) is \$60 per roll. To make the math easy, let's assume both bales contain 1000 lbs of dry matter.¹ **Which is better?** The problem is, **you can't know without a forage test.**

Fortunately, you stop by to see your County Agent and he/she talks you into letting them take a forage test from each lot (\$10 per sample). Let's say that Lot A is fairly high in all the key quality values and has a total digestible nutrients (TDN) percentage of 59%. Lot B also is pretty good in most of those same key values, but it had a TDN of 51%.

If you have dry cows, the hay from Lot A will meet or exceed the TDN requirement for dry cows. In other words, the hay from Lot A will be more than enough to maintain them. However, without providing energy supplementation along with Lot B, your cows will lose weight. I won't bore you with the ration-balancing, but in this example every 1000 lbs of hay that is consumed will require the equivalent of 54 lbs of whole cottonseed (for example) to meet the animals needs (Figure 1). At current prices, such supplementation will cost you roughly an additional \$6.20 per bale from Lot B, for a total of \$66.20 (\$60 + \$6.20). At \$65 per bale and 59% TDN, Lot A is a better deal!

If you have lactating cows, the difference becomes even more pronounced. Hay from Lot A still will have enough TDN to meet those cows' needs. Hay from Lot B, however, requires some supplementation. In fact, Lot B will need to be supplemented with the equivalent of 220 lbs of whole cottonseed for every 1000 lbs of hay that is fed in order to meet the TDN requirement of lactating beef cows (Figure 2). That will cost about \$25.30 on a per bale basis. So, a ration balanced around hay Lot B will cost the equivalent of \$85.30 per bale (\$60 + \$25.30) rather than \$65 per bale from Lot A.

All of sudden, that "cheap" hay doesn't seem so cheap, does it? Of course, there is much, much more that goes into this than the gross oversimplification that I just went through. **But, the point is: "cheap" can sometimes be very expensive.**

¹ This is rarely going to be the case! First, nearly all hay will have some moisture in it. Usually, about 15% of a bale's weight will be water. Furthermore, just because the baler's manual says it makes 1000 lb bales, doesn't mean that it actually does. Remember, that bale density is just as important as the size of the bale (4 x 5, 5 x 5, etc.).

Obviously, hay quality varies considerably. The only way to truly understand the cost of “cheap” hay is to compare apples to apples. Having an accurate analysis of a hay lot’s forage quality is key to this comparison. As you can see, it doesn’t take much to make your money back on a forage test.

To learn more about how to test forages for quality and for advice on comparing hay lots, contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office visit. We also encourage you to check out our website at www.georgiaforages.com. We’re proud to announce a new look and some added functionality for this website, plus more information about management-intensive grazing.

Figure 1. Basic cost comparison of two lots of hay in a dry beef cow’s ration.

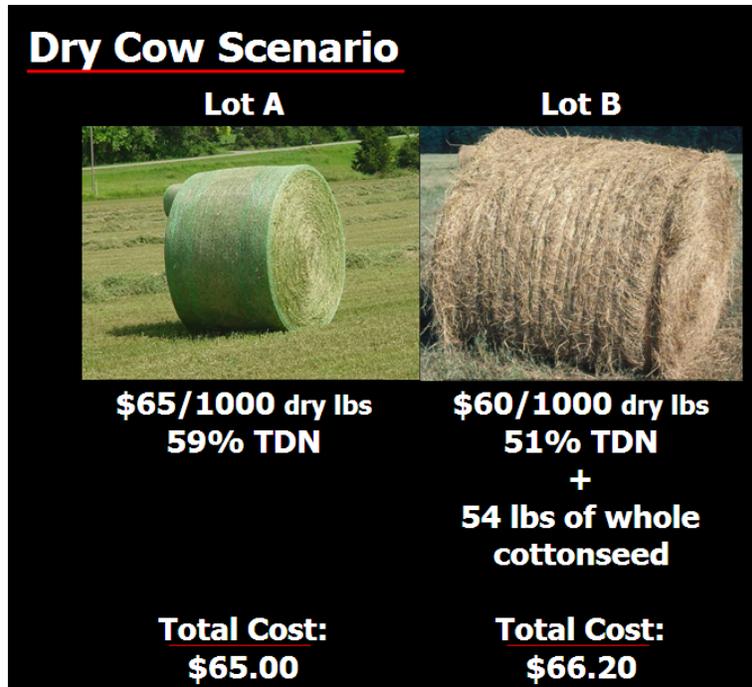


Figure 2. Basic cost comparison of two lots of hay in a lactating beef cow’s ration.

