

RESULTS OF THE 2008 SOUTHEASTERN HAY CONTEST

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Forage testing has become increasingly important as supplementation costs increase and we continually try to “pinch pennies” when feeding stored forage. In 2004, a group of Extension Agents and Forage Specialists in Georgia, Florida, and Alabama saw a need for greater awareness about the value of forage testing. They began a hay contest to promote forage testing and emphasize its importance. Fortunately, Chip Blalock and the other good folks at the Sunbelt Agricultural Expo in Moultrie, GA agreed to allow us to hold this contest in conjunction with their annual event in October of every year.

Since 2004, the Southeastern Hay Contest has allowed producers to compete for top quality honors in six categories: warm season perennial grass hay (bermudagrass, bahiagrass), perennial peanut and alfalfa hay, perennial cool season grass (tall fescue, orchardgrass, etc.), mixed and annual grass hay, grass baleage, and legume baleage. Despite another drought-stressed growing season across the entire region, 195 entries from all across the Southeast (Texas to Virginia) were received in 2008.

What is Relative Forage Quality?

The Relative Forage Quality or RFQ index was developed by the University of Wisconsin to predict the fiber digestibility and animal intake of harvested crops. When first developed, these equations were not applicable to warm season forages like bermudagrass, bahiagrass, or perennial peanut. Since 2003, hundreds of warm season forage samples have been used to develop an RFQ equation for bermudagrass and other warm season forages. Currently, all forage sample results from the UGA Feed and Forage Testing Lab in Athens contain an estimate of RFQ. This value is a single, easy to interpret number that improves producer understanding of a forage’s quality and helps in establishing a fair market value for the product. Since RFQ consistently compares forage crops across harvest maturity, fertilization regimes, and even plant species (i.e. bermudagrass, bahiagrass, perennial peanut, or tall fescue), it makes RFQ the ideal tool to fairly rank different forage lots on quality. The Southeastern Hay Contest recognizes the top 3 RFQ scores in each of its six categories and announces the winners at the Sunbelt Expo. This year’s winners are shown in Table 1.

How can Relative Forage Quality help me?

Relative Forage Quality allows hay producers to easily categorize and price hay lots based on relative quality. Cattle producers can purchase hay lots depending on its end use. For example, there is little need to feed high-end quality hay to livestock that could easily utilize poorer quality forage. Hay with a RFQ of 115-130 can be fed to maintain beef cow-calf pairs and hay with an RFQ of 125-150 is adequate for stocker cattle or young growing replacement heifers.

Has the hay contest made a difference?

Contestants have obviously learned more about how to improve forage quality. In general, the average RFQ in each category has steadily increased since the contest’s inception in 2004 (Figure 1). In fact, the overall average RFQ score has increased in each year. This year, the average RFQ was just over 118.

Table 1. Category winners from the 2008 Southeastern Hay Contest.

Category	Farm	CP, %	TDN, %	RFQ
Warm Season Perennial Grass Hay	<i>Overall Range:</i>	<i>(6.2 - 20.6)</i>	<i>(40.9 - 66.3)</i>	<i>(70 - 144)</i>
	Yance Farms Inc. Houston Co., AL	16.3	64.6	144
	Gill-Starr Farm Anderson Co., SC	13.2	59.0	138
	Lightning's Hay Farms Grady Co., GA	15.5	62.6	131
Perennial Peanut/Alfalfa Hay	<i>Overall Range:</i>	<i>(11.3 - 27.9)</i>	<i>(56 - 73.3)</i>	<i>(103 - 228)</i>
	David Harden Walker Co., GA	26.0	73.3	225
	McCollum Farms Coffee Co., GA	23.2	71.6	215
	Vickers Still Farm Coffee Co., GA	22.9	69.5	191
Cool Season Perennial Grass Hay	<i>Overall Range:</i>	<i>(9.1 - 16.6)</i>	<i>(46.6 - 68.1)</i>	<i>(90 - 163)</i>
	Mitch Whitfield Banks Co., GA	16.6	68.1	163
	James Burton Walker Co., GA	15.6	55.5	122
	John Watson Walker Co., GA	12.4	55.4	115
Mixed, Annual Grass, or Other Hay	<i>Overall Range:</i>	<i>(5.6 - 19.4)</i>	<i>(42.5 - 66.0)</i>	<i>(78 - 178)</i>
	Little Joe Reams Madison Co., FL	16.0	66.0	178
	Trice Farm Upton Co., GA	11.3	60.5	162
	Lightning's Hay Farms Grady Co., GA	10.1	59.2	157
Grass Baleage	<i>Overall Range:</i>	<i>(7.7 - 17.4)</i>	<i>(40.5 - 61.0)</i>	<i>(70 - 164)</i>
	Hidden Valley Farms Oconee Co., SC	10.4	61.0	164
	Troy Platt Madison Co., FL	17.4	60.0	155
	Leavelle Farms Tuscaloosa Co., AL	8.5	57.3	153
Legume Baleage	<i>Overall Range:</i>	<i>(11.8 - 12.9)</i>	<i>(55.6 - 58.2)</i>	<i>(122 - 144)</i>
	Troy Platt Madison Co., FL	12.5	58.2	144
	Troy Platt Madison Co., FL	12.9	57.7	132
	Troy Platt Madison Co., FL	11.8	55.6	122

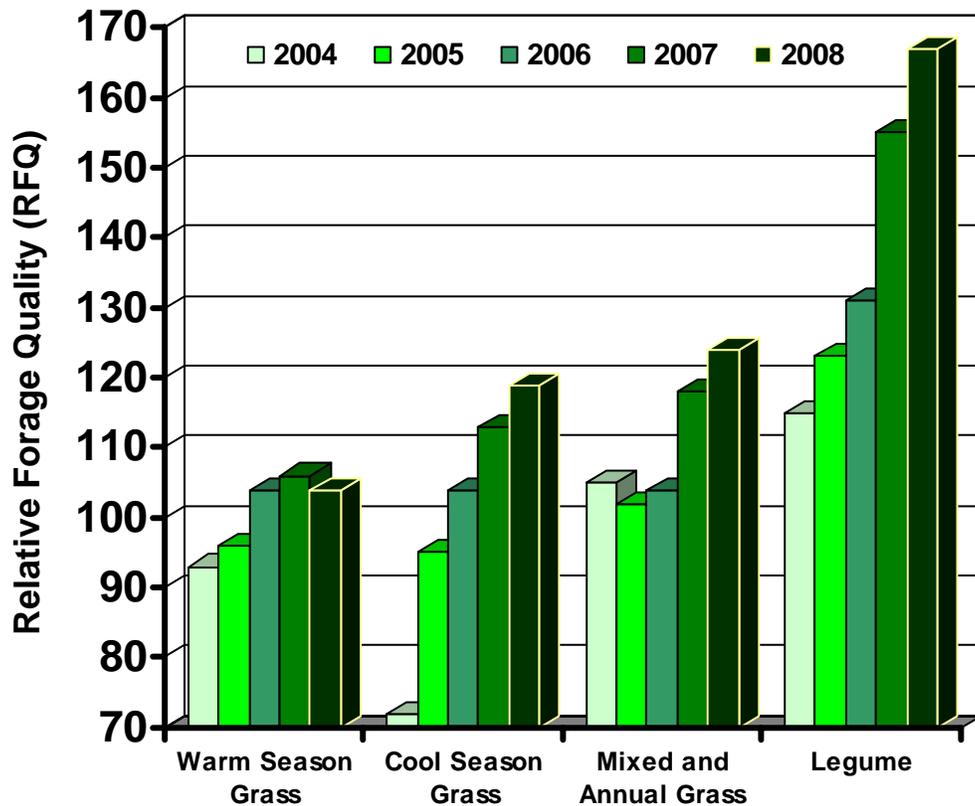


Fig. 2. Mean RFQ of hay samples submitted to the four categories within the contest in 2004-2008.

More importantly, forage quality at the local level has substantially increased. Last year, we researched the impact that the hay contest was having on counties that had actively participated in the contest. In each of 10 counties that we examined, we noticed a substantial increase in forage quality after just the first few years of the contest’s existence, even among those forage samples that weren’t entered into the hay contest.

Think you can do better?

Submit your sample in the summer of 2009 through your local county Extension office. An official entry form and the contest guidelines for next year’s contest will be posted soon at www.georgiaforages.com. For more information on this 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.