

TIPS FOR BUYING HAY

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Dennis Hancock, Forage Extension Specialist
The University of Georgia

Current prices for fertilizer and other inputs have caused a lot of hand-wringing by our cattlemen that make hay and rightfully so. It is incredibly expensive to make hay, especially good quality hay. Yet, the most recent edition of the Georgia Department of Agriculture's Market Bulletin had well over 200 ads for hay for sale and most of it was being offered at less than \$80 per ton. We apparently have some producers who are able to produce hay very cheap.

Perhaps you have used Dr. Curt Lacy's Computerized Enterprise Budgets (<http://www.ces.uga.edu/Agriculture/agecon/budgets/budgetsexcel.htm>) and found that you can no longer justify making hay. Using this budget tool and current prices, you may find that your costs for making hay are a lot more than what you would have to pay for it. If buying hay is your best option, there are several keys to ensuring that you don't lose your shirt in the process. This month's article presents eight tips for cattlemen who are buying hay.

1. Figure Out How Much You Need

I guess this one goes without saying. But, it isn't always clear how much hay a cow can or should eat. In general, a brood cow will eat about 2% of her body weight 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. So, if you need to feed 100 cows for 3 months, you will need approximately 300 bales. If the cows average more than 1200 lbs, 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 (as described in last month's article) 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.

2. Match Hay Lots to Your Animal's Need for Quality

As a dry cow enters the last trimester of her pregnancy and then onto nursing her newborn calf, her nutrient needs change. The hay that is fed to these cows will need to change, too. So, it may be best to look for at least two different hay lots that are of differing quality. Of course, each situation will be different so it is important to consult with your County Agent if you're not sure how to estimate how much quality you will need.

3. 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, I consider this to be a deal-breaker. 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.

4. 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. A prime example is the nitrate level in the hay. 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). Certainly, some forages are prone to be high in nitrates, such as the millets, sorghum x sudan, and, even, bermudagrass. But, even tall fescue and alfalfa can occasionally have high levels of nitrates. This is another good reason 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.

5. Know Which Cutting You are Buying

By knowing which cutting you are buying, you can learn more about the forage's quality and what could be hiding in the bales. High nitrate levels, for example, are usually more common in the second and third cutting of bermudagrass (though it can occur anytime). Another example is that the first cutting of bermudagrass will have the most weeds in it, and the last cutting will often have the lowest quality.

6. 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, buy hay that has been stored inside or under cover.

7. 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 and 85 lbs of dry matter). 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.

8. Know the Weight of the Bales

This is arguably the most important issue. Bales should always be bought on a "per-ton" basis. Cows don't eat bales, they eat pounds of forage. If you buy a bale that is advertised as weighing one thing and it weighs less, then the effective cost goes up.

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. As a rule of thumb, 4 ft bales will have to be extremely tight (dense) and at least 5 ft tall to weigh 1000 lbs. Similarly, 5 ft bales will have to be extremely tight and at least 4 ½ ft tall to weigh 1000 lbs.

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 cost on a "per ton" basis. This will also help you to better understand the transportation costs on a "per ton" basis, as well.

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.