

POOR HAY CAN LEAD TO THE POOR HOUSE

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The winter of 2013-14 is still fresh on every Georgia cattleman's mind. It was an unusually brutal winter for us and even tougher on our cattle. Though an exact count is not possible, several hundred and perhaps thousands of beef cattle didn't survive the winter. Several factors contributed to this tragedy. Of course, there was the cold, rain, and snow/ice, which provided extraordinary stress on our cattle and prevented our winter annuals from producing an appreciable amount of forage until late winter. But, the last straw was the exceptionally poor quality hay that was being fed.

You may recall from my article in last December's Georgia Cattlemen's Magazine that the forage samples we had analyzed up to that point from the 2013 growing season had been 10-16% below average in relative forage quality (RFQ). I warned of the potential problems from this low quality hay. Thankfully, many of the readers of this magazine took action. Unfortunately, many others did not.

All Hay is NOT Created Equal

It never ceases to amaze me that there are some poor folks that still think that "hay is hay," as if one lot of hay has just the same amount of nutrition as any other bale. Obviously, those folks don't read the Georgia Cattlemen Magazine, so I needn't worry about offending them. No doubt, those of you who are loyal readers of this magazine know better.

The fact is that no two lots of hay are the same. Figure 1 presents three bales from three different lots of hay. Notice how the nutritional value of each is distinctly different. Lot B is nearly identical to the average sample for bermudagrass hay that went through the UGA forage lab last winter. Lot A would be sufficient for dry cows. But, Lot C is actually the only one of these three lots that could be fed to cows with calves on them and expect the cows to hold condition and get bred back.

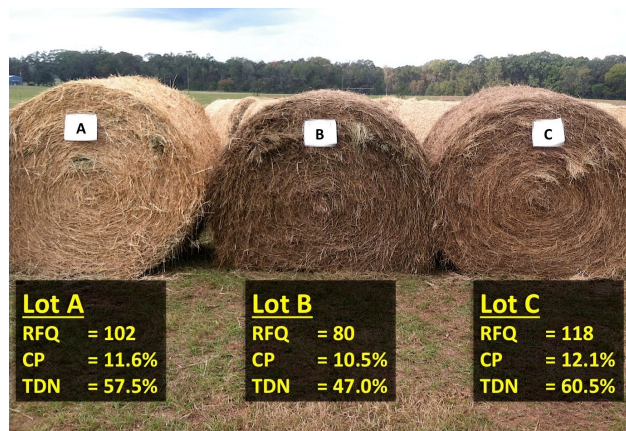


Figure 1. Three round bales from three distinctly different lots of hay.

Unless You Test, It is Just a Guess

When consulting with the many producers who experienced problems and animal losses this past winter, I would inevitably begin by asking, "Have you tested your hay?" This is a crucial first step. As my friend and forage extension colleague at Auburn University, Dr. Jennifer Johnson, is fond of saying, "Unless you test, it is just a guess."

Even the feel, texture, smell, or appearance of the hay is generally not a good indicator of how nutritious the bale is or how much of the bale the cows are likely to eat. In fact, attempting to do so has frequently caused producers to buy or use forage that has lower nutritional value and is often uneconomical or counterproductive. Cheap hay can be expensive, especially when one finds the hay needs an extraordinary amount of supplementation to meet the needs of the animal. Forage quality can only be evaluated by obtaining a representative sample of the forage and subjecting that sample to analysis in a qualified laboratory. For more on how forage quality is defined and how you can ensure you have the right forage for your animals, check out our new guide to "Understanding and Improving Forage Quality" (http://www.caes.uga.edu/Publications/pubDetail.cfm?pk_id=8079).

Obtaining a Representative Forage Sample

Obtaining a representative forage sample is critically important. The first step is to identify a single lot (forage taken from the same farm, same field, and cut under the same conditions within a 48-hour time period). Once a lot is defined, sub-samples should be obtained from at least 20 different bales (hay, baleage) or areas (silage) that are selected at random. Avoid taking grab samples from the bale or stack, as this may cause leaf loss and result in a sample that is not a fair representation of the lot. It is best to use a clean, sharp, forage probe (Figure 2). Detailed sampling procedures are provided by the National Forage Testing Association (www.foragetesting.org). For information on selecting and purchasing forage probes, see the frequently asked question (FAQ) page entitled “What hay probe do you recommend and where can I get one?” (www.caes.uga.edu/commodities/fieldcrops/forages/questions/hayprobes.html) on the University of Georgia’s Forage Extension website (www.georgiaforages.com).



Figure 2. Sampling a lot of hay bales using a Colorado hay probe.

How Does Your Hay Rank?

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Southeastern Hay Contest, which allows producers to demonstrate just how good their forage quality can be. The SE Hay Contest is held each year in association with the Sunbelt Ag Expo in Moultrie, GA. Entries come in from 11 southeastern states and producers vie for bragging rights. Historically, winners get bragging rights, a handshake (if they are lucky), and recognition in the press. But, this year, we’ve instituted cash prizes to those who have the highest quality in their category. Thanks to AgriKing and Georgia Twine, sponsors for the Southeastern Hay Contest, we have added cash prizes for 1st-3rd places in each of the six categories, as well as one top prize winner. There is now a total of \$750 in cash and in-kind prizes. We hope this encourages our very best hay producers to participate. The complete SE Hay Contest rules and entry form are available here: www.caes.uga.edu/commodities/fieldcrops/forages/events/SEHC/SEHC.html. Please note: all entries must be in by **5 p.m. on Monday, September 22nd**.

In addition to the prize money, we’ve added another major opportunity for our SE Hay Contest participants. As you might know, I’m constantly being asked for a listing of some of our hay producers who produce the best quality forage. I have never maintained such a list. Yet, many of our SE Hay Contest participants sell hay and baleage and could use another way of connecting with potential customers. With that in mind, we are initiating a SE Hay Directory. If the person wants to be listed in the SE Hay Directory, there is an annual set-up fee of \$30 per person/farm. This only is paid once. If a producer has only one SE Hay Contest entry and they want to be listed in the SE Hay Directory, then it is \$30 per farm or person. If they have 20 entries in the contest, it is still just \$30 per farm or person to be listed in the directory. The details about the SE Hay Directory are available at the aforementioned website for the SE Hay Contest rules and entry forms.

For more information on forage quality, beef cattle nutrition, and the SE Hay Contest and Directory, visit our website, www.georgiaforages.com. If you have additional forage management questions, visit or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office by dialing 1-800-ASK-UGA1.