GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR HAY

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When helping hay and forage growers, we typically spend a lot of time talking about how to make the most hay or get the most for it. After a substantial dip in hay acres and one of the worst seasons on record, many livestock farms and ranches need tips on how to get the most *out* of their hay.

Many of these producers have very little hay to get them through this winter. Some will be hauling-in hay from off the farm. Others will try to make the most out of their own forage inventory. In either case, these producers need to stretch those haystocks and make it last as long as possible.

There are many ways to stretch limited hay supplies. For many years, Extension professionals and industry leaders have promoted the use of supplemental feed supplies and strategies for extending the grazing season. Those are among the most widely-used and cost-effective strategies. Yet, sometimes, those strategies just are not enough.

Restricting access to feeding areas can be a useful tool in stretching limited hay supplies. Recent research out of the Midwest indicates that mature cows can have their access to hay restricted to 8 hours without loss in weight or body condition score. In that study, this strategy helped stretch the hay by an extra 15%. Restricting access can help stretch hay, but it can be taken it too far.

In this same research, the cows' body condition score and weight were reduced when their access to hay was restricted to only 4 hours. Further, it is important to manage young and thin animals separate from older ones in better condition. In addition to better matching those animals' needs, this will avoid situations where "boss" animals root-out thinner and less-dominant animals.

It is critically important to feed good quality hay when restricting the animal's access. Every bite has to count. Be sure to test the forage quality using a lab accredited by the National Forage Testing Association and consult with a nutritionist or Extension professional to ensure the quality is sufficient.

Using a good feeder is one of the best strategies for stretching hay. Feeding-related losses can be substantial when hay is fed on the ground or feed-pad without any device to keep the animals from treading or soiling it (Table 1). Using a hay ring or feeder that limits the animals' access to the hay can reduce these losses. For example, research has shown the conventional hay ring can keep feeding losses below 10%. Newer, cone-style hay feeders can elevate the hay off the ground and further reduce feeding losses.

Table 1. Range in feeding losses that are typical for different methods of feeding hay.

Method	Waste, %
Enclosed Feeders	
Cone	2 - 5
Ring	4 - 10
Trailer	10 - 13
Bale Cradle	15 - 20
No Protection, Fed on the Ground	
Consumed in < 8 hrs	7 - 12
Unlimited Access, Multiple Days	> 40

Unrolling round bales or flaking-off rectangular bales and feeding directly on the ground can also be done with relatively little waste, but it requires careful management. To minimize loss, feed only what the animals can clean up in less than 8 hours and choose a new site each day.

Capturing the nutrients is also critically important if one is to make the most of their investment in hay. The value of the nutrients in a hay bale is no longer insignificant (Figure 1). By using a feed pad, one can more easily collect and spread the nutrients that remain. If feeding in the pasture, pick a new feeding site each day and be strategic about the spots that are picked. Avoid feeding near trees, mineral feeders, or water sources to decrease the rate at which nutrients tend to concentrate in those areas. Be careful to avoid feeding in wet areas or areas where waste could wash into streams or ponds. Keep those valuable nutrients on the farm and put them where they are needed most.

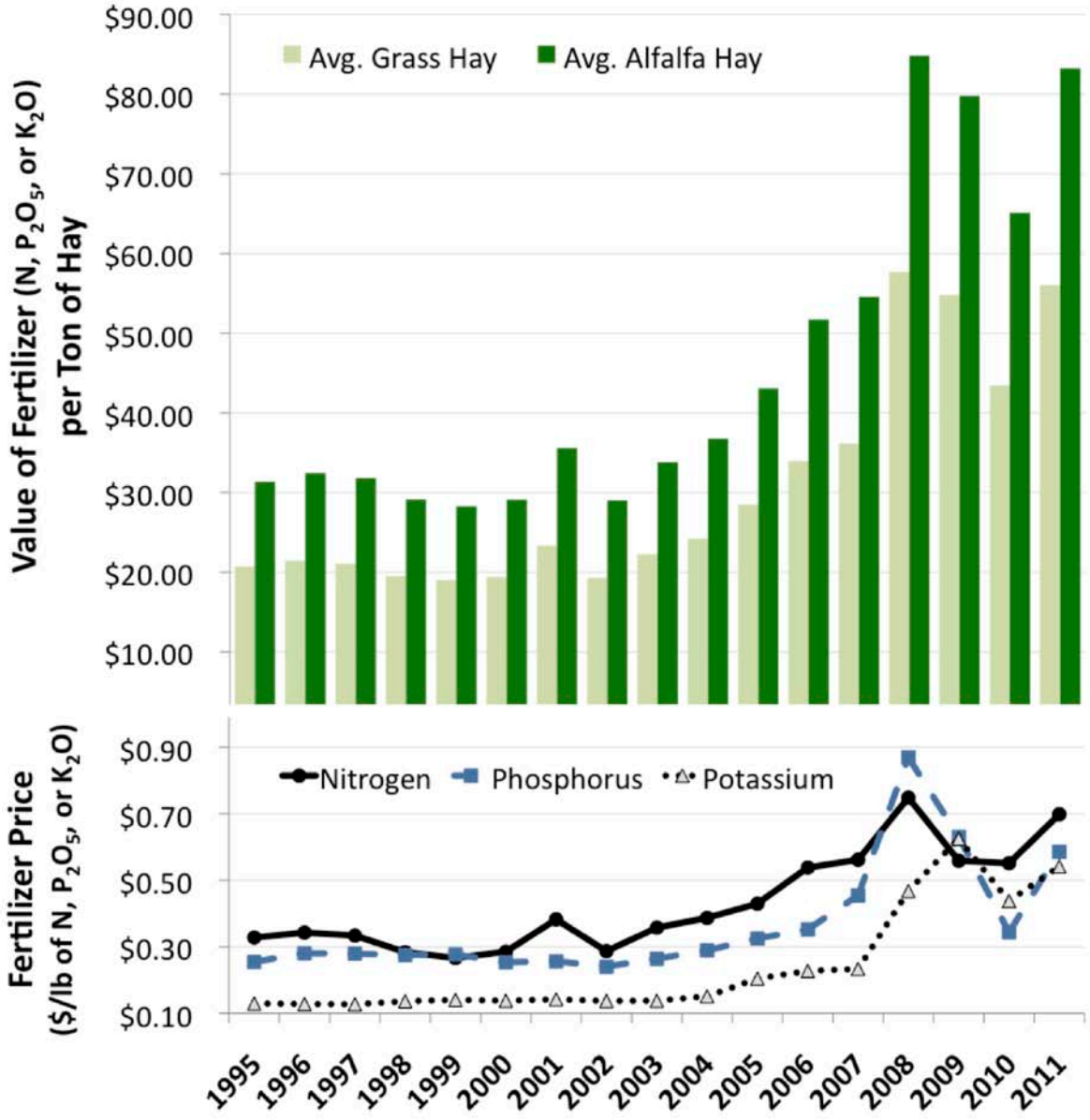

Figure 1. The fertilizer value (N, P, and K) in grass and alfalfa hay (top) given fertilizer prices (bottom) since 1995.