“Hay Quality vs. Quantity”

A common conversation between livestock owners this time of year might sound like this...“Are you going to have enough hay to get through this winter?”...“Yeah the spring hay was pretty bad but I think I cut enough johnsongrass and crabgrass this fall to get by”. Most good farm managers know how much hay they will need to last based on the number of head and days they expect to feed, but the best producers also make feeding decisions based on the quality of their hay.

Whether we are talking about cattle, goats, horses, or some other species of livestock, hay is the most widely used and stored feed in Tennessee during the winter, so it is important that we understand the factors that influence hay quality and the criteria used to evaluate the quality of our hay. This will help in developing a feeding program that will effectively and efficiently carry livestock through the winter.

Many factors can be used to determine the quality of hay. A forage test will give you numbers such as protein, fiber, and digestibility of hay. These numbers are very useful in determining hay quality and in mixing feed rations. A forage test from the University of Tennessee is only $10 and will give you critical information when deciding what and how much to feed.

Although forage testing is important, the most important judge of the quality of hay is the animal itself. Animal performance will ultimately determine whether your hay is of high quality or not. Animal performance is influenced by the amount of hay consumed, the digestibility and nutrient content in the hay, and toxic factors of the hay. In other words, if the animal won’t eat it, or if there is not enough nutritional content to benefit the animal, or it contains something that might actually be harmful, then the animal will not perform at a satisfactory level.

The species of hay, as well as the stage of maturity when it is harvested, have a tremendous impact on hay quality. For instance, a mixture of grass and legume will produce better hay than just grass hay alone. Also, as grasses and legumes advance from the vegetative to the reproductive (seed) stage, they become higher in fiber and lower in protein, digestibility, and palatability. Forage quality deteriorates rapidly as the forage matures, even though yield continues to increase.

As mentioned in our hypothetical conversation, many bales of johnsongrass, crabgrass, and even dallisgrass have been put up this summer and fall. While each of these can be fairly good quality if cut at the proper stage, they lose a great deal of nutritional value if cut at a later stage. Remember, just because it can be baled does not mean it is quality hay. For example a bale of dallisgrass will not have as high protein content as a bale of tall fescue/clover, assuming both are cut at the same maturity level.

Producing high quality hay should be a goal of every producer, but years like this one make it hard to do. When buying hay or feeding your own, be sure and take quality into consideration. Feeding high-quality hay results in better weight gain in market animals, and better milk production and rebreeding in females. Feeding high-quality hay can also cut costs by reducing the level of grain supplementation needed during winter. If you would like more information on forage testing or determining the value of your hay, contact the University of Tennessee Extension office in Van Buren County at (931) 946-2435.