

OSU Sheep Team

Supporting Ohio sheep producers by providing educational information, sheep research conducted at Ohio State, resources, and contact information for leaders in Ohio's sheep industry.

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All Hay is Not Created Equal

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(Previously published in [Progressive Forage: August 31, 2017](#))

As producers continue making preparations for winter hay usage, many are looking at possibly purchasing or selling hay crops.

Many times over my past years as an agriculture educator and so-called "expert" in the field, I have been asked, "What do you think my hay is worth?" or "How much should I give for hay this year?" Oftentimes, sight unseen or with very limited information to base my response on, they expect a precise answer. Can't do it.



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Hay is often priced by what your neighbor is selling it for down the road. After all, if their price is cheaper than yours, they will probably make the sale before you. But are the consumers really getting what they paid for?

Let's begin by asking a few questions and try to guide you down the road to consider that maybe all hay is not created equal.

Packaging

For example, how is it packaged? Are we talking small square bales or big round bales? Small square bales can be wire-tied, shipped in from out of state and weigh 100 pounds each; or maybe plastic string-tied, soft and saggy, weighing 55 to 60 pounds each still sitting in the field.

Are the big bales net-wrapped, in a silage bale; or maybe tied with sisal twine so the cattle can eat the string and move on? Just remember, hay can come packaged in many different ways.

Let's look at big round bales for a minute. What type of baler was used? Are the bales so tight the cows will have difficulty pulling the hay out or too soft, creating too much waste? Are they going to be hard to stack? Does size really matter? Are the bales 4X4, 4X5, 5X5, 5X6, 4X6 or 6X6?

How much do they really weigh? (You expect to get a ton of grain when you order it, don't you? You expect the ration to be set to an exact crude protein level so you can calculate intake.) Did you even weigh them? Not every 5X5 bale weighs 1,000 to 1,100 pounds.

Just how much moisture is in the bale? What is the right moisture level for hay after it has been stored for a while – maybe 12% to 20%? Did it rain last night? Is it last year's hay? Is it or was it stored in a barn?

Questions like these may and should affect pricing. Good-quality grass hay can easily be priced at \$50 to \$75 a ton higher depending on type and quality.

Forage type

How about the type of forage it is? Cool-season grasses like tall fescue, orchardgrass, and smooth bromegrass may differ in feed value from a warm-season grass like indiagrass or switchgrass, even as grasses among themselves may differ in feed value.

Just what is "mixed grass" hay? Mixed with what? Is it truly a grass-legume mix? Just because it has a little hop clover in it doesn't make it so. Grass-legume hay should be a minimum of 25% to 30% legume before you jump on that bandwagon.

Harvest

Then there is the big question of how and when it was harvested. Many hayfields are harvested way past prime for high-quality feed forage. I do realize weather conditions and off-farm work schedules may play a part in when you can harvest, but if I am buying hay, I am looking at the quality of product for sale, not the process used to produce it.

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Also, many producers are looking for tonnage to sell and are not so greatly concerned about quality. More bales per acre means more bales to sell – and remember when Texas was paying \$100 a bale for anything? What about those producers just trying to clean up their fields for the fall?

If they can sell a little hay on the side to cover the cost, then so be it. OK, I guess it does beat a snowbank.

No, not every producer is out there trying to get rid of junk, yet the words “as is” usually, to me, mean buyer beware. Is quality a concern in your operation?

Weeds

Just how much feed value is in wild carrot or ragweed anyway? If you are comparing on crude protein alone, excluding weedy hay, it should be at least 10% to 12% to meet the needs of mature cattle depending on what stage they are in. Remember, if it is green and you can bale it, that does not mean they will eat it or benefit from it.

Purity is another factor to consider. Hay cut late often has unwanted weeds as well as many weed seeds that will be spread on your farm when unrolled and fed to livestock. What better growing conditions for unwanted seed than fresh manure piles and good seed-to-soil contact as your [livestock] walk it in?

Hay taken from fields being groomed or cleaned up may contain blackberry, buckbrush, oak sprouts, thistles, or sericea lespedeza as the hay is being harvested later in the year. None of these have great feed value, as far as I know, and can be readily spread on your farm if you are not careful. Just how much does it cost to spray for weeds anyway?

Visual indicators

Color and aroma are also important qualities of good hay and should not be overlooked. Checking for moldy, musty or dusty hays may indicate they were put up too wet, stored improperly or were the bottom bales of the stack. You should avoid this type of hay at all cost.

Does cheap hay usually mean cheap results? That depends. Hay often harvested after local combining of fescue seed is more likely to lack the quality and substance compared to early cuttings without seed development present.

Most [ruminants] will respond more favorably to quality growing conditions by rewarding you in areas like higher conception rates, heavier birthweights, and heavier weaning weights. When I last checked, all three of these will return higher profits to you at market time.

I am not saying high-quality hay is the only answer toward these goals, but it couldn't hurt. Are you buying additional supplements to offset lower-quality hay, and could that be avoided if you would just purchase a little higher-quality product?

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Solutions

So, what are some solutions to this dilemma? First and foremost, know your operation. Just what are you feeding, and what do they really need? Maybe you could:

1. Check the field you think you might want to buy for hay before the producer mows, rakes, and bales it. Just see what is out there.
2. Purchase a couple of sample bales from the lot, weigh them, take them home, feed them out and see how your [animals] react.
3. After the sample bales have been consumed, look for waste, sticks, trash, and unwanted items the [animals] did not eat. Waste items will have weight, take up space in a bale, and you are paying for a product that will not be used.
4. Test the hay yourself. Most hay tests cost less than \$25, which is usually less than the cost of one big round bale. Find out how many pounds of total digestible nutrients, digestible protein, vitamins, and minerals you are getting for your dollar.

The next time someone asks you to price hay, are you going to look at what your neighbors are selling it for, or talk to the customer about quality and how it will better fit the needs of their operation?

Just a thought.

Posted by [Braden Campbell](#) at 8:00am

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