

You Can't Trust the Weatherman: Educating Forage Producers on the Basics of Haylage Production

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Introduction

The late-boot stage that is considered the optimum balance between yield and quality of most cool-season grasses, occurs in the first two weeks of May in Tennessee. While many producers recognize the need to harvest hay in this window, weather forecasts make it difficult to find a 5-day window that is generally needed to cure, harvest, and store hay using traditional harvest methods. The dilemma forage growers face each spring is does one cut the hay when it needs to be cut to have good quality even if there is rain in the forecast, or do they wait until the forecast is clear and cut later, even though doing so means quality will be reduced?



Results

- . Haylage production increased by at least 100% following these educational efforts.
- . In 2019 over 30,000 rolls of haylage were produced in Smith & Trousdale County.
- . Producers who choose to harvest dry hay have been educated on the importance of harvesting hay for quality rather than quantity.

Highs & Lows of High Moisture Hay

Haylage involves baling hay at 40-60% moisture and then wrapping it in plastic. This creates an anaerobic environment which allows the forage to ferment. Since haylage is baled at a higher moisture, it doesn't need nearly as much time to dry down. Typically, the entire process from cutting to wrapping is less than 48 hours. This means producers can harvest forage when it is at the right quality, not when the extended forecast is perfect. This benefit of doing everything in a shorter window can also be the biggest challenge of haylage production. Whereas with dry hay, you go from cutting to storage in several days, with haylage, you are going from cutting to storage in a matter of hours. Other challenges include the need for specialized equipment, potential handling and feeding difficulty, and plastic disposal.



Teaching Methods

Haylage Field Days were conducted in 2017 & 2018 during which the process of baling and wrapping high moisture hay was demonstrated. Over 150 producers attended these field days and were able to see the equipment operated. Haylage has also been a topic taught to 250 producers during our semi-annual Master Beef Producer class.

It's been a learning process for us for sure and terribly time consuming but "IF" you have a quality forage it is a wonderful tool to help bring "feed value" instead of "get by" to the trough .—

James Dillard, Smith County Producer