

For Premium Alfalfa Hay, “Stick” Close

Premium-quality dairy hay sells for \$15 to \$30 more per ton than low-quality hay because it is more digestible, which leads to higher milk production. The most important factor influencing alfalfa quality is maturity at cutting. This factor the producer can control, but determining the maturity of standing alfalfa by eyeballing the field is imprecise. Lab analyses are precise, but by the time the results are back, quality may have deteriorated.

A quick and accurate method was made workable for southern Idaho alfalfa growers by Bob Vodraska, recently retired University of Idaho extension educator in

Twin Falls County. The procedure involves collecting a random sample, measuring the tallest stem, and determining the growth stage of the most mature stem.

It was simple—“the grower went out into the field with a yardstick and UI publication CIS 1052,” said George Hamilton, extension educator in Jefferson County at Rigby. The fact sheet by Vodraska and Mir-M. Seyedbagheri, extension educator in Elmore County at Mountain Home, has the tables the grower needs to determine percent ADF (acid detergent fiber), which is a measure of the digestibility of alfalfa hay.

But now it is really simple—the grower goes out to the field with the UC Intermountain Alfalfa Quality Prediction Stick. The tables in CIS 1052, “Predicting Alfalfa Hay Quality in Southern Idaho,” have been put on the four-



Grower Gini Vanderpool (in hat) and Kathy Roy, Canyon County extension educator, use the UC Intermountain Alfalfa Quality Prediction Stick on the V. M. Diamond Ranch near Caldwell where Angus cattle are raised and premium-quality alfalfa hay is grown.

sided stick.

“It gives you an ADF reading on the spot,” said Vodraska. “You can know the quality of your alfalfa in a few minutes instead of having to wait two or three days for laboratory results.”

Not only is it rapid and easy to use, but results are “90 percent accurate,” said Bob Ohlensehlen, extension educator at Twin Falls. The Twin Falls staff attach two water-repellent tags to the sticks that increase their usefulness. “The tags have conversion charts so producers can go from percent ADF to percent crude protein,” he said. “The advantage is, I get these two answers—ADF and protein—instantly.”

Hamilton, one of the organizers of the annual Hay School in Rexburg, sold about 80 of the \$7 sticks to the 140 participants, and the Idaho Hay Association is selling the sticks at cost to their members.

“The goal,” said Hamilton, “is to get the sticks in the hands of as many growers as possible because we need premium-quality hay, not medium-quality hay. The market is for dairy quality.”

To use the stick, the first step is to select a small specific area to sample. Vodraska—taking the stick yet another step—suggests flinging a hula hoop around the field to define the necessary sampling areas. “If you don’t have a hula hoop, you can measure a 2-by-2-foot square, but it takes longer.”

Further, Vodraska, grandfather of four, suggests the use of grandchildren to fling the hoop so the sampling is truly random.

For more information, call (208) 885-6681.



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