When feeding hay to the dairy herd, incorrect perceptions about the effects of forage quality can increase feed costs and decrease milk production. Some of these incorrect perceptions and the cost to the producer for these perceptions are addressed below.

**Incorrect perception #1.** I only feed my milking cows 5 lbs of hay -- quality doesn’t affect milk production.

**Cost of perception #1.** Even at this low inclusion rate, the quality of hay affects milk production and reproductive performance. Let us compare hay with a relative feed value (RFV) of 150 (ADF=30% on a dry matter basis) to hay with a 120 relative feed value (38% ADF). If early lactation cows actually consume 5 lbs of hay, they could milk an additional 1.5 lbs of milk per day on the 150 RFV versus the 120 RFV hay. Now if you factor in that the cows will eat less (2 lbs total) of the 120 RFV hay, each cow consuming the higher quality hay may produce 7 lbs more milk/day than if they were fed the lower quality hay. Also, remember that early lactation cows are the money makers and for each pound more milk they give at peak, this translates into 200 lbs more milk over that lactation.

**Incorrect perception #2.** My hay is poor -- I don’t want or need to test it.

**Cost of perception #2.** All hay should be tested for its nutrient content. Contrary to popular belief, it is more important to test poorer quality hay than good quality hay. Poorer quality hay which is not allocated to the correct group of cattle and then supplemented properly can result in lower milk production, lower growth rates for heifers, and dry cows may lose weight which affects production and reproductive performance during the next lactation.

**Incorrect perception #3.** My cows are eating hay with 18% crude protein.

**Cost of perception #3.** Energy, not protein, is the hardest nutrient to provide in adequate amounts to dairy cows, heifers, and beef cattle. When purchasing hay the most important numbers to evaluate are the ADF and NDF content. These fiber contents are used in calculating the relative feed value of a hay or other forage. The ADF and NDF content relate to the digestibility of the hay, how much energy cattle can get from the hay and the amount of it they will consume. The lower the ADF and NDF content the better the quality of the hay. For early lactation dairy cows, hay should contain over 180 relative feed value or under 28% ADF on a dry matter basis. When the herd is very stale, hay with a relative feed value of 140 or greater (ADF value of 35% on a dry matter basis) can be fed.

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