

Spring Forage Decisions Affect Dairy Profits for the Upcoming Year



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Spring-time marks the renewed start of plant life. This renewed beginning is seen through pastures turning green and grasses and planted crops starting to grow. Management practices during the early spring directly impact future performance and profitability on the dairy for the upcoming year. Below are some of common misperceptions and why we need to rethink our management practices as they relate to the harvest of spring-time forages.

Statement #1: Kentucky's wet weather during the spring makes it nearly impossible to put up quality hay.

Response to #1: Kentucky's wet springtime weather does make it a challenge to put up quality forage. We cannot turn the water off and on to accommodate the growth of forages and our harvest schedule as farmers in the western United States. However, by getting haying equipment ready ahead of time, by putting up the crop as baleage instead of dry hay, and starting to look for a window to harvest forages earlier rather than later we can manage the crop to get the best quality forage to feed. Many years alfalfa and grasses are ready to harvest in April not the middle to end of May.

Statement #2: I have a set order in which I complete my spring cropping chores. I always get my corn planted then I harvest my alfalfa and then grass hay.

Response to #2: In order to make the most of what mother nature throws at us, flexibility and ability to adjust our cropping operations are key. We can set our priorities early in the cropping year, but these need to change with time. Multi-tasking is common place in our personal lives as we juggle numerous tasks at home. The same is true for your farming enterprise. You may have to do more than one cropping operation in a day's time. For example, you may need to plant corn earlier in the day and later that afternoon harvest alfalfa or grass forages as hay or baleage.

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Statement #3: I just expect that my first cutting of hay won't be very good. I'll just feed it to the heifers and dry cows.

Response to #3: The higher the quality of any forage harvested or grazed, the more nutrients the dairy cow or heifer receives from the forages, the less grain needs to be fed, and performance improves as seen with increased growth, greater milk production, and/or improved chances of getting rebred. Also, we realize that growth of forages in the spring represents the largest percentage of the yield over a forage season. For example, two-thirds of the growth of cool season grasses, such as orchardgrass and fescue, occurs before mid-June with the majority of this growth occurring in the first cutting harvested in early May. Similar trends occur with alfalfa.

Statement #4: I harvest my alfalfa and grass hay the end of May.

Response to #4: Forages need to be harvest when they reach a certain stage of maturity not by a date on the calendar. The stage of maturity forages are harvested determines the profitability of your operation. As grasses and legumes mature past their ideal stage of maturity for harvest, the amount of energy and how well cattle eat them decreases. This results in your forages producing less product - meat or milk - that you can sell. Grasses and small grains should be harvested just when the seed head begins to emerge from the stem, known as late boot stage of maturity. Alfalfa should be harvested during the late bud to no later than the early flower stage of maturity. These stages of harvest allow for optimum combination of quality and quantity of forage to feed to your dairy cattle.