WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
WALLA WALLA COUNTY EXTENSION

Why Cut Hay Early?

The most obvious reason to cut a hay crop early is the improved nutritional quality. Other factors to consider when deciding how early to cut include alfalfa weevil populations, frost damage and bulbous bluegrass infestation.

Protein content of alfalfa can easily decrease by three or more percent from the prebloom to midbloom stage, while Acid Detergent Fiber (ADF) can increase as much as five percent or more. Neutral Detergent Fiber (NDF) can increase by as much as seven or more percent. The same nutritional quality progression takes place in grasses. The reason is the development of fiber in the plant as it matures.

The other side of the story is that total tonnage keeps increasing past when the nutritional quality really starts to drop off. So, one of the major factors in determining how early to cut is what will the end use of the hay be? What is your market? What is the price difference between top nutritional quality hay and lower nutritional quality hay? If you are feeding it yourself, what quality do your animals need and what other forage sources do you have?

Another important factor to consider in an early cutting decision is the weather risk. The alfalfa plant develops in relation to the temperature. The plant develops faster with higher temperatures and it develops slower with lower temperatures. With unsettled spring weather, sometimes the plant development can be very erratic. This is one of the times when the “art” of haymaking comes into play.

Earlier maturity hay with a little rain damage is usually better nutritional quality than later maturity hay with no rain damage. It depends on how much rain damage. If you are selling the hay, sometimes the rain damage can be more detrimental to price than the quality decrease.

Alfalfa weevils can decimate a crop’s quality and yield. The alfalfa weevil is a foliage feeder. The larval stage does most of the damage. The alfalfa weevil is normally a first cuttings pest, but in some areas may cause serious damage to the regrowth with resulting losses to the second crop.

The economic threshold for alfalfa weevil control is dynamic, changing with the height of the alfalfa. Once alfalfa weevil populations reach the economic threshold level, the application of an insecticide or harvesting are the only satisfactory methods of control. Early cutting may keep the population from reaching the economic threshold.

If alfalfa is frosted during first cutting growth, the growth rate decreases and the maturity rate increases. Because of this, sometimes the best management is to early cut after the frost damage and get started with the regrowth for a second cutting.

Early cutting can be an effective method of controlling bulbous bluegrass. By cutting early, the bulbous bluegrass will not affect the overall quality as much as waiting for the alfalfa to grow more. This also will result in a cleaner second cutting of alfalfa, because the bulbous bluegrass won't re-grow as well as the alfalfa.

First cutting is a very stressful time for the hay producer. There are many pitfalls and hurdles to overcome, but with some knowledge of the problems and options, and a little luck, you have a better chance of getting that hay in the shed green and dry.

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