

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

By: Ben Sims

K-State Research and Extension Greenwood County

Agriculture Extension Agent

*“Hay Feeding Strategy”*

Today’s high input costs and tight margins for farmers and ranchers requires them to be more efficient than they may have had to in the past and watch every penny going in and out. This especially applies to cattle feed, and specifically hay. You may not have found yourself with an abundant amount of hay leftover the past couple of winters, but if you are dealing with a number of old hay stored, you may be looking for appropriate ways to incorporate that into a forage feeding strategy.

Let’s say we are talking about hay that is 2-3 years old. Depending on the type of hay, when it was cut, and how it was stored, there could be a lot of variability in the quality of that forage. To help determine the quality of the hay, it is recommended to keep track of the harvest date. If we know the harvest date and are familiar with the maturity pattern in the area, we will have a pretty good idea about the nutrient quality of that hay.

For example, if you have some older prairie hay bales that were harvested the last week of August or first of September, we know those bales are going to offer a lower level of nutrition. On the flip side of that, if you have some prairie hay that was harvested in the first week of July, there is a higher probability that the nutrient level that forage offers will be higher.

The newest higher quality bales need to be fed to lactating cows that have a higher maintenance requirement. If you don’t have a choice and need a forage to feed, the older lower quality bales can be fed, but producers will likely need to offer vitamin and mineral supplement support as well. In 2-3 year old hay that is stored outside, the beta carotene in those bales deteriorate rapidly, so it is important to offer them a vitamin A supplement. The important thing to remember there is that Vitamin A has short shelf life, so mineral needs to be as fresh as possible.

In some herds, producers can separate the fall and spring calving cow herds, allowing them to offer the older hay to cows with lower maintenance requirements, such as cows in mid-gestation. However, if that is not possible, it leads us to a different strategy. With fall calving cows just coming out of the breeding season and spring calving cows in their last trimester together, one suggestion is to primarily offer them hay cut this year. Then every once in a while, you could throw them a bale of the older hay to try and use it up and that should allow the cattle to keep from getting too thin.

Save the date for an upcoming program related to water sources for livestock. March 13, 2025 will be “Livestock Watering System Options” tour and demo. We will gather at 1 pm on 230<sup>th</sup> west of Highway 99 at the Collinge Ranch. Please contact the office for more information and to register.

Information comes from KSU Beef Cattle Institute experts Dr. Phillip Lancaster and Dr. Bob Larson.