For Release July 11, 2015

Time to Make Hay

AGRI-VIEWS
by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's been a crazy crop season so far in 2015. Dry, then rain and cool and now back to some heat and more typical Kansas summer weather. Wheat harvest started late, rain delayed first and second cuttings of alfalfa as well as bromegrass. I don't remember bromegrass harvest ever running this late. The upshot of the late bromegrass harvest is going to be very poor brome hay quality. It will be very critical for producers to test their brome hay for protein before they start using it this fall and winter. Contact the Extension Office to borrow a hay probe or for assistance getting forage samples sent off for analysis.

But that's all behind us now. What we have in the immediate future is prairie hay harvest. There are a lot of factors that go into timing of prairie hay harvest. As we move through the summer, the warm season grasses and forbs continue to grow with the grasses starting to head out in mid July and continuing on into late August. As the summer progresses forage quality, usually determined by digestibility and crude protein, declines as forage quantity, pounds per acre, goes up.

We have that quality versus quantity balancing act going on and then we have harvest timing to consider; meaning harvesting early enough in the season to allow the prairie plants time to recover before fall dormancy starts to set in. Under normal conditions, once you cut a native hay prairie, the plants immediately start to regrow. When this regrowth starts the plant first uses food reserves from its roots and crowns. As new leaves grow, the plant is able to start restoring those reserves. In most situations we feel like it takes about six weeks to get those root reserves fully rebuilt. Or think of it as taking six weeks to get the gas tank filled back up.

It is important for those plants to go into winter dormancy with a full tank of gas. Without a full tank of gas, the plant growth the following spring will be reduced and potential forage production will be less. Most years the prairie plants start shutting down in mid-September. Some years it may be a little earlier, other years a little later. But if we work off that average of mid-September, and back up the requisite six weeks, then we see that we need to cut no later than very early August IF we want to protect the health of the prairie plants. Cutting later every once in a while may not make much difference, but if it is done year after year the quality of the prairie will start to reduce.

Now that we know our late date that we want to harvest, we can go back to the quality vs quantity challenge. Many producers want to wait as late in July as possible to harvest hay to get as many pounds as possible. But quite honestly, quality started dropping rapidly after June 1st and it drops even quicker after July 1st. The increase in pounds of forage from July 1 to July 31 isn't as much as many producers think it is, but the loss of quality is substantial. So to make the best quality prairie hay, harvest as early in July as you can. The loss of quality is not made up by the increase in quantity.

One caveat in this comes down to wildlife management, especially grassland nesting songbirds. Some species are still trying to finish nesting in early July but by the end of July, most of them are far enough along that the impact is far less. If you are concerned about grassland birds then hold off until the end of July to harvest. But certainly, for the sake of a healthy prairie, get that hay put up by very early August at the latest!

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