

Livestock Feed Nutrition Labels

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

You can go into any grocery store, pick up any food product and you will find a nutrition label on it. It'll tell you how many calories, grams of fat, protein, just more things than you want to know. Doesn't matter if it's a can of tomato sauce or a Twinkie or HoHo. It's got the information right there for you. I was recently putting the final touches on a program I did on winter bird feeding and was talking about appropriate foods for birds during cold weather. Yes, even bags of bird feed have a nutrition label on them. But if you are feeding livestock and grab a bale off the hay stack, you can look all you want and you won't find a nutrition label. Sure, if you are buying some supplement or bagged or premixed feed, you'll get an analysis. You know what you've got, you know what you're feeding it to and you can calculate how much of that feed those animals will need every day.

But when you've got homegrown feed, you're often shooting in the dark. I can pull a book off the shelf and give you some average values. But over the years, when I compare actual tested feed values with average values, especially for forages, they rarely match up very well at all. The problem with using averages, or just trying to eyeball it, is that if you are feeding too much you are wasting money (feed) and possibly creating problems by having cattle carrying a little too much "condition". Or you are underfeeding them which will cause problems (and cost you money) with underperforming animals. We sometimes feel that homegrown feed is "free" so we don't worry about over feeding. As I drive around the county most of the cowherds usually show that they aren't being underfed to be right honest.

We need to be spending more time, and a few dollars, to test all of our harvested forages. Your bromegrass, prairie hay, forage sorghum, even your alfalfa will be different, cutting to cutting and year to year. The quality of that forage is so dependent on the weather that year, the timing of the cut, sometimes even the fertilization, or lack there of, and the timing of the fertilization. Over the years when I compare forage samples for bromegrass and prairie hay that we've sent in to the labs versus "book" values, the book values are over one fourth to one third higher than what the actual submitted forage sample values are. Yet everyone always claims that their hay is above average!

We also probably need to move away from the cheapest forage analysis that the lab offers. This test is often based on what's known as ADF, acid detergent fiber. While it gets you in the ballpark, it often misplays those fly balls, so to speak. Since many of the follow up values like total digestible nutrients (TDN) and net energy (NE) are calculated from this, if it's off, these other values are off. We'd be better off to spend that extra four or five dollars per sample and move up to a test that uses nonfiber carbohydrates (NFC), crude protein (CP), fat, and neutral detergent fiber (NDF) in an equation that gives us a far truer idea of the value of that forage in ruminant nutrition.

I know that this is not just one, but two big steps for a lot of producers. Let's start with getting a good sample of every field and every cutting. We have forage probes at the Extension Office that you can borrow to get those samples. Then bring the samples to the Extension Office and we'll get them to the lab and request the right analysis that will help you know, that whether you feed that forage or sell it, you know exactly what you have and how to use it more efficiently in livestock feeding rations!