



PRODUCTION

Forage Harvest and Marketing - FAQs

August 2008

How do I determine the price of standing hay?

The price of hay varies from year to year and depends entirely on the supply available and demand requested. The simplest way to determine the price of standing hay is to calculate the cost of cutting and baling and subtract it from the baled price. At times, the sales agreement will also include a risk deduction of five to 15 per cent.

Find the price of hay in local papers or use the Feed Grain and Forage Listing Service to find the asking prices in your area. The listing may also have some standing hay advertised in your area. The cost of cutting and baling hay depends on yield of the hay as well as the equipment being used. It's generally agreed that hay costs between \$35.00 to \$40.00 / ton (\$39.00 to \$44.00 / tonne) to cut and bale. Some operators may charge more or less. Check out the Custom and Rental Rate Guide and Calculating Hay Rental Agreements to help get started.

What is my hay worth?

The price of hay is strictly based on supply and demand. When hay is plentiful, the price tends to be depressed while the price rises as supplies drop. The simplest way is to watch the newspapers and compare quality. Saskatchewan Agriculture maintains a Forage, Feed Grain and Custom Services Listing.

At what stage should I cut alfalfa?

Deciding when to cut alfalfa is based on three factors, desired harvest quality, the expectation of a second cut and the weather.

The quality of an alfalfa crop is at its highest just before flowering. At this stage, however, the forage yield hasn't been maximized. For producers who need the higher quality, such as feedlots or dairy operations, the optimum time may be just before flowering. For cow/calf producers, protein and forage yield is maximized at 10% to 25% flowering. At this stage, the balance between forage and quality are maximized.

If you're expecting a second cut from your alfalfa, consider that alfalfa needs about six weeks of good growing conditions before a second cut and six weeks before the first killing frost. Generally, the first killing frost occurs in late September (earlier in the north and later in the south). Therefore, the second cut should occur sometime in early to mid-August and first cut in late June or early July.

If the alfalfa isn't staged properly for the first cut by the first week of July, decide whether to wait to cut later, and forget the second cut; or, cut the alfalfa at the earlier stage and hope for sufficient growth for a second cut. (Cutting Alfalfa? Think About It)

The weather should also be considered in your decision. Perfect harvest timing is fruitless if drying conditions aren't favourable. The advantage of optimum forage quality at the desired harvest stage can be lost if the windrow gets an inch of rain. Watch the long-term forecast and try to find a reasonable harvest window.

At what stage should I cut my grass hay?

Like alfalfa, grass hay quality is at its highest during the vegetative stage and decreases once flowering begins. Once flowering initiates, crude protein can decrease by 25 to 50 per cent. Often, however, the yield hasn't reached its potential by the flowering stage and yield may be lost at the expense of quality. For many grasses, maximum yield is at, or immediately after, the bloom stage.

When harvesting all hay, consider the weather in your decisions. Good quality hay can quickly deteriorate after a rain. Watch the weather forecast and try to find a reasonable harvest window. Poor hay put up dry is better than good hay put up wet.

Can I graze my alfalfa after my bales are removed?

To reduce the chance of winterkill, alfalfa can be grazed anytime before mid-August and after the first killing frost (October 1st). It's important to allow alfalfa six weeks to replenish its root reserves before the first killing frost. However, consider that bloat is still an issue late in the season.

Links and further reading:

Forage, Feed Grain and Custom Services Listing

Custom and Rental Rate Guide

Calculating Hay Rental Agreements

Foragebeef.ca

Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development

Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives

Montana State University Extension Service

North Dakota State University Extension Service

For more information, please contact the Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377.