

The Ultimate Rush

You may have heard the expression, “that is such a rush,” and that expression is generally mentioned in an attempt to describe something as fun or exciting or even beautiful. We also use the term “rush” to describe hurry, and when considering our Spring season, both uses of the word “rush” apply. What piece of art can compete with the beauty around us? Plants are awakening from their winter slumber with lovely blooms and new leaves, insects are buzzing about eagerly pollinating those early bloomers, and wild animals will soon, if not already, be giving birth to this year’s crop of youngsters.



Rebekah Norman,
Extension Agent III

For those who grow grass to feed livestock, there isn’t much prettier than seeing that forage field green up with the first flush of growth. Seeing all these things makes us need (and want) to rush about ourselves. There are things to be done. Equipment should be prepared for this season’s use; perhaps fertilizer applied, perhaps weeds controlled. And planning for that first cutting of hay is a priority. Tips to consider for high quality hay production:

Adjust mower height to be no lower than 3 to 4 inches. Research has shown that on cool season forages, leaving this additional leaf improves stand longevity, jump starts forage regrowth, and reduces ash content in hay.

Cut at the ideal forage maturity. Why? Because forage stage of maturity at harvest is the single most important factor impacting hay nutritional quality. Ideal growth stage for grasses is around the boot stage or late bud to early bloom for legumes. If there is a mixed grass-legume stand, base the cutting decision on grass maturity, not the legume.

Some folks may chafe at the notion of lesser tonnage due to earlier cutting, but there are advantages that can make up for the loss. By keeping the forage vegetative (without mature seed heads), the forage continually grows. Research has shown when this practice has been followed in a grazing system, more than one ton of additional forage per acre is produced—simply by keeping the forage vegetative!!!! Many a producer has also reported back to me their amazement at how quickly fields recovered when mowed higher. Consider the additional benefit of improved nutrient content of a hay produced from forage in vegetative growth vs. reproductive growth—the difference is considerable and can literally make the difference between needing supplementation along with hay during winter months vs. no supplementation required—a significant financial savings!

Dry hay as quickly as possible. With Tennessee's humidity and frequent rainfall, this is no easy task. Cutting early in the day after dew has dried will allow a full day to jumpstart drying for the fastest possible drop in moisture and reduced respiration prior to nightfall--an important start in preserving maximum nutritional quality.

Additional management decisions can be made based on what is most important to the producer. Take nonstructural carbohydrates for example. The time-of-day hay is cut impacts the nonstructural carbohydrate (NSC) content of hay. There has been much discussion in recent years regarding the desirability or undesirability of NSC content; usually NSC is a good thing unless you are feeding an animal with metabolic issues. Consider when photosynthesis occurs; photosynthesis increases NSC concentrations which generally peak in late afternoon before sunset. If you are trying to produce hay with maximum NSC concentrations, cut in the afternoon. If you are attempting to produce hay with lower NSC concentrations, cut in the morning.

An attentive reader has noticed the last two paragraphs provide conflicting advice. One says it is better to cut hay in the morning, the next paragraph says it is better to cut in the afternoon. The reader may cry "foul" to this confounded advice; but these conflicting priorities are a perfect snapshot of a third "rush" inherent in agricultural practice. Farmers work within a complex system with multiple environmental impacts controlling the results; some might even describe farming as a career of taking calculated risks. Understand upcoming management options, be prepared to act when the weather window is right, and hang on for the ride as the environment does what it will do.

Farming—the ultimate rush.....