Planning Your 2014 Hay Crop

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Spring is on its way, and farmers are getting ready for another season to produce top-quality hay and baleage. To make preparations complete, Cornell Cooperative Extension is holding a “Hay, Baleage, and Forage Quality School” in early March at three eastern New York locations. (Get a registration form at http://blogs.cornell.edu/capitalareaagandhortprogram/category/field-crops/.) At this school, veteran and new farmers alike will develop their management skills to produce quality hay, understand the aspects of forage quality, and learn how to feed or market their product.

To start your forage plan, first think about your customers (or the livestock that will eat the crop). What are their needs? Are the nutritional requirements high for finishing grass-fed beef, or modest for overwintering horses? Fiber, digestibility, protein, and energy levels vary in forage, and can be controlled by how we manage the crop. Cutting grasses in the boot stage and legumes in the bud stage will give low-fiber highly digestible forage. Applying nitrogen fertilizer will boost the protein in grass. Setting aside fields that will not get manure or potassium fertilizer can produce low-potassium hay for dry cows. What you harvest will depend on your management. Will your customers pay for this extra management?

Of course, harvesting exactly what you want is not quite that easy since we have to take whatever weather comes our way. You can prepare for bad weather. Baleage systems have helped many farmers increase their forage quality and beat (most of) the weather. There is a learning curve. Start by mowing into wide windrows so the forage wilts uniformly (not crispy on top and soggy underneath). Get tightly packed bales by raking uniform windrows and feeding them into the baler evenly or just feeding one side at a time when windrows are small. Especially for legumes, inoculants can help you preserve (not improve) forage quality. Wrapping bales requires paying attention to details. Bales that “inflate” in the first few days after wrapping, took too long for the initial phase of fermentation. The “School” in March will get into the details. For dry hay, propionate can be used as a preservative when you cannot get the last few percentage points of moisture dried out. You will learn about this practice as well.

I often get calls about how to improve a hay field. At the “Hay, Baleage, and Forage Quality School” you will learn basic plant identification to first determine what good species are growing in your field. Then, what are the options for renovation or starting over. For frost seeding (broadcasting seed during the winter), we only recommend red or ladino clovers. Frost seeding grass is too risky, since it is light and fluffy and stays on top of the soil. A no-till drill can be used to inter-seed thin stands with grass and/or clover. With either method, it is good to reduce competition for the new seedlings by close clipping/grazing in the fall before seeding. If fields are rough and have few desirable plants, then primary tillage (plowing) and secondary tillage (seedbed preparation) are usually needed. For established fields, scouting in March is important to see how plants survived the winter, especially alfalfa. Once in a while even grasses can suffer winter damage. Scouting will help you correct a problem early, so that come harvest time you are not surprised by a measly yield.

These are just some of the “parts” of a forage system. Evaluate what works well in your forage system and what needs improvement. Learn how to manage each part of a forage production system by attending the “Hay, Baleage, and Forage Quality School” in March. You will also learn about fertility, machinery, harvest management, storage, marketing, economics,
and the nutritional needs of various livestock. If you have questions contact Aaron Gabriel (518-380-1496, adg12@cornell.edu), Kevin Ganoe (315-866-7920, khg2@cornell.edu), or Ashley Pierce (518-272-4210, arp253@cornell.edu). This two-session class will be March 4th & 11th in Mt. Upton; March 5th & 12th in Hudson; and March 6th & 13 in Ballston Spa. Pre-registration of $10 per session is due by February 28th, through CCE Herkimer County, 5657 State Rte 5, Herkimer, NY 13350. A registration form is at http://blogs.cornell.edu/capitalareaagandhortprogram/category/field-crops/.)