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Planning for a Potentially Short Hay Inventory on the Ranch

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By beginning to plan now for a potentially short hay supply, producers will be in a better position to fully utilize the options available to them. Photo credit Troy Walz.

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The abundant spring and early summer moisture we have received in Nebraska has been record setting in many areas and has resulted in hay meadows and fields being inundated with water. Even if the rain stops, for many producers, these flooded hay meadows and fields will produce significantly less this year, due to the damage caused to forage stands by the standing water. This sets up a scenario where many producers may find themselves short on hay for the upcoming winter of 2019-2020. In addition, the quality of feed that is harvested may be less than “normal” as delayed cutting in waiting for fields to dry may mean forage is more mature, reducing energy and protein content of the hay. Now is the time to plan for management options with reduced forage production from perennial hay fields.

1. Reduce forage demand for the upcoming fall and winter. It is hard to believe that hay may be short with an abundant precipitation year in Nebraska, but for many cow-calf producers, this may be the case. Consider weaning calves as well as pregnancy testing yearling heifers and cows early as a method to reduce forage demand. Early shipping of calves off the ranch as well as culling non-pregnant heifers and cows can help to significantly reduce forage demands. Visit with your tax accountant about deferral of income from livestock sales if you normally would market these cattle after the first of the year, but due to weather conditions are being forced to sell in 2019.

2. Plant annual forages to provide additional feed. Summer annuals can be planted until late July and still be very productive assuming adequate soil moisture and fertility is present. After late July, spring annual forages such as oats, spring triticale and barley as well as brassicas can be a better option for forage production as they will continue to grow on into the fall as long as temperatures are above the mid-20s Fahrenheit. Planting annual forages into wheat stubble may be a good option this year to produce additional forage.

3. Find and secure other forage resources. Evaluate whether it may be best to bring the feed to the cattle, or the cattle to the feed. In many places in Nebraska county roads will require significant work before trucks can haul feed in. Cornstalks for grazing, cover crops, and annual forages can be used to replace hay. Ammoniating wheat straw or cornstalks can significantly improve the quality of both of these residues. Use caution when bringing hay onto the ranch from outside sources that may contain weed seed.

4. Compare feed options and contract protein and energy supplements early to lock in supplies. It is likely that protein and energy dense feeds such as distillers grains will be in demand to be used with low quality forage. Consider purchasing these feeds early to guarantee supplies. Utilize tools such as the [Feed Cost Cow-Q-lator](#) to effectively compare feed options to one another. Include all costs, such as hauling, storage, waste and feeding expense to fairly compare feeds to one another.

5. Utilize perennial hay fields and meadows that were too wet to hay with grazing during the fall and winter. Once the ground is firm or frozen enough for cattle to get out on it, consider grazing these areas through the fall and winter. The use of an electric fence for strip grazing and/or windrow grazing can help increase harvest efficiency and minimize waste. Areas that are too wet to harvest this summer, may be able to be grazed later this year.

6. Minimize waste during storing and feeding. With uncovered storage, store your hay using methods that will minimize nutrient and dry matter losses from weathering. Make a dense bale, as a dense bale will sag less and have less surface area in contact with the ground. Store hay on an elevated, well-drained site so it will not soak up moisture from wet soils or standing water. Store bales end-to-end with the line oriented north to south to allow prevailing winds to blow snow past the bales. If more than one line of bales is needed, space adjacent lines at least 3 feet apart to increase airflow and allow sunlight to penetrate the bales. When feeding, research has shown that certain types of bale feeders along with time limiting access of cattle to hay feeders can reduce waste. For cattle being fed in a dry-lot, the use of these tools can be helpful to efficiently utilize hay.

7. Consider the use of an ionophore to stretch feed resources. Where cattle are being fed a supplement daily, consider the use of the ionophore monensin for cows to stretch feed resources. Research has shown that when cows are fed an ionophore the amount of hay needed can be reduced by 7-10 percent.

8. Consider limit feeding cows. Limit feeding is when cows are fed a diet containing ingredients that are energy and protein dense which meet the cow's nutrient requirements but the

cow is restricted in how much she eats. Energy and protein dense feeds can be fed with low quality forage to stretch limited forage supplies.

9. Test your hay/forage. Knowing the nutrient content of your hay/forage will help with ration formulaion to ensure that you are meeting your cattle's nutrient requirements. Having an accurate analysis is important in developing a cost effective feeding strategy.

10. Partner with farmers who have planted cover crops on prevent plant acres. In some areas that were too wet to plant this spring, farmers have planted or will be planting cover crops on acres that they were not able plant to corn or soybeans. These crops can be grazed after September 1.

By beginning to plan now for a potentially short hay supply, producers will be in a better position to fully utilize the options available to them. Resources on options discussed in this article can be found at the beef.unl.edu website. Nebraska Extension Beef Specialists and Educators are also available to provide additional assistance and information on these topics.

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