The Weather Challenges for Haying

Sarah Browning
Extension Educator

The hay business is a difficult one, and the weather is often the root of the difficulties. Bailing at midnight, lack of rain and delayed harvest are annoyances that can be directly caused by weather. It never fails; it does not rain unless you have hay to bale as the sun goes down, so there are few common obstacles and helpful tips.

Rain on Windrow

There are many cases when rain or damp conditions persist and the alfalfa windrows remain on the ground for days. This presents potential weed and regrowth issues for the area under the windrows. The weeds may require spraying to maintain quality and protect the alfalfa stand. The plants under the windrow will be delayed, which will cause part of the field to bloom later in the year after the timing of the next harvest. Although it is important to base the timing of the next harvest on the desired goal for your hay, if possible, wait for the delayed regrowth areas to begin to bloom before cutting.

High Temperatures

High temperatures during the summer can cause alfalfa to grow more rapidly, which may be misleading for the timing of the next harvest. Even though the crop has bloomed and "appears" ready for harvest, the high temperatures actually extend the recovery time from previous cutting. High temperatures, especially at night, reduce the stored nutrients in the roots, which are required for plant vigor after cutting. Timing extra time between cuttings in order for the plant to build up its "reserves.”

Drought

Dry conditions in rainy fields obviously pose a problem to alfalfa production. In extremely dry conditions, the alfalfa plant will be nearly dormant and will stop growing. It is difficult to know whether to windrow when there is available or let it be. As the alfalfa continues to sit there, it will slowly lose feed value and tonnage. Harvesting the hay is an option, if there is enough feed to justify the fuel and labor. Grazing is also another option, but it can cause extensive damage due to the risk of balking. Cutting the hay may stimulate the alfalfa to try and regrow, but moisture is ultimately needed for those new shoots to grow.

Moisture for Field Operations

Alfalfa quality is not only impacted by harvest timing, but it is also affected by curing, raking and baling conditions. Rain can take nutrients away from the plant during the curing process and can also cause mold. Getting hay to dry fast not only helps to avoid the potential for rain damage, but plant cells continue to respires until hay gets to about 50 percent moisture, losing potential weight. To help the dry-down time, spread the recently cut hay in a wide swath and turn the hay to expose moister hay underneath. Hay baled too wet can get moldy, which can result in a feed or catch on fire. On the other extreme, raking or baling hay too dry can cause extreme leaf loss, which is the most valuable part of the plant. Rack the hay when it is about 30 percent moisture and bale dry hay when the leaves are re-tied by dew or high humidity.

Use Forecast Tools

Using forecast tools can help plan the cutting, raking and baling operations. The National Weather Service site (www.weather.gov) provides a hourly forecast graph for temperature, precipitation, dew point and humidity. This hourly forecast may help to plan the timing of the field operations in order to successfully yield a higher-quality hay product. Source: Hay and Forage Minute – Dr. Bruce Bradshaw, UNL Professor of Agronomy, Extension Forage Specialist.