ADAPTING WINDROW WIDTHS HELPS MANAGE HAY QUALITY DURING VOLATILE CUTTING WEATHER

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The effects of weather on hay production are numerous, and the choices and adjustments made are absolutely critical at cutting time to maintain the highest yield and quality of the crop. Unfortunately, sometimes finding a suitable window by following the forecast closely and getting the crop cut and baled as quickly as possible just doesn't pan out.

So what can you do? Fortunately, adjustability of windrow width, conditioner rolls, and crop streams allows you to set up the best possible outcome. Windrow width cannot be overstressed. Though unique climates make hard-and-fast rules difficult, some common recommendations and considerations on windrow width are as follows.

In favorable weather, with moderate humidity, little chance of rain, and light wind, wider windrows make short work of curing and can often be picked up the same day they were cut. The less destructive handling of a windrow the better.

But what if cutting the crop can't wait, and cutting it now with rain in the forecast is worth the risk? A nicely conditioned, narrower windrow will generally hold up better under one rain or wind event than one that is made very wide. A wide windrow can be driven into the ground by hard rains or blown across the field in sustained high winds. When the weather improves, a narrower windrow can be raked to give it another chance to cure with minimal damage.

A 10-foot windrow that gets almost dry then rained on multiple times before being picked up will lose quality and may not provide adequate Beta Carotene and vital nutrients to livestock. Cattle and sheep can experience dystocia among other problems if they are unable to make enough Vitamin A. As the Carotene deficiency is often associated with drought-stress, the potential nutrient deficiencies in feed raised in otherwise fine conditions, ruined during curing, can be overlooked.

In prolonged hot, dry weather, making windrows fluffy and narrower protects the hay from drying out too much or getting sun bleached. The leaves in alfalfa windrows that are over dry will knock off into powder when baled.

If multiple people on your farm help harvest forage, don't assume they will know the logic for windrow width that you chose. Keep lines of communication open and be ready to change strategies when the weather changes.

Increasingly volatile weather will continue to challenge forage and hay growers across the country, so it is important to take advantage of equipment adaptability.

Articles for further reading:

Evaluating Hay Quality: University of Maryland Cooperative Extension

Vitamin A Deficiency in Beef Calves: Iowa State University Vet Diagnostic and Production Animal Medicine

Drought-affected forages may be deficient in vitamin A: BEEF magazine, Dec. 2021

Has Bleached Hay Been An Issue In Your Forage Production? Cisco Farm Seed, March 2020

Vitamin A Deficiency in Sheep and Cattle