ASK THE EXPERTS!

Members are encouraged to write to our editors here at the Forage Focus! *We will regularly feature questions provided by our readers - please understand that not all questions will be published; however, your questions will be answered by one of our professionals. Please submit by mail or email. Thank you!* Your Forage Focus Editors

Q: Should I use scissors cut/PEAQ sticks to monitor forage quality of first cutting alfalfa? *LK, Minnesota*

Dear LK,
A: Either or Both.

The scissors cut/clip method for monitoring forage quality (RFV) of first cutting alfalfa is a proven method that's been around for over 10 years. This sampling/data reporting have been tremendously effective in aiding growers with timing of first cut to achieve desired quality. Timing is important because first cutting is typically the highest yielding of the season, providing the majority of the forage fed year-round, and spring growth often does not mature normally.

More recently, the PEAQ (Predictive Equations for Alfalfa Quality) method has also proven to be a reliable predictor of first harvest timing in the Midwest. The method was developed by researchers at the University of Wisconsin, and has been validated in many states across the country. It utilizes a modified yardstick that combines plant height and maturity to provide an estimate of RFV of the standing crop. Advantages over the traditional scissors-cut method include immediate data turnaround and reduced expense (need only purchase a stick, rather than repeated forage testing lab fees). MFA maintains a supply of PEAQ sticks. They are $10 each, plus shipping - contact the MFA office for more information.

Numerous comparisons of PEAQ to scissors-cut sampling methods over the years have given us confidence that the PEAQ method provides satisfactory results. When deviations have occurred, it has usually been at early sampling dates well ahead of the time to harvest, or during or immediately after climatic extremes. The methods have generally fallen within acceptable ranges of error at dates closer to harvest. Both methods are subject to sampling error, so differences can sometimes be caused by sampling error (eg. foreign material such as weeds or fall residue in scissors cut, wrong cutting height; or using the wrong side (maturity) or height for PEAQ stick).

It's important to remember the goal is to predict harvest timing, and neither PEAQ nor scissors cut results substitute for a forage test on stored forage. Also, for first cutting, RFV and RFQ agree fairly well, so a measure of one provides a reasonably close estimate of the other for standing first-crop alfalfa. Commercial forage testing labs continue to be valuable partners in this program.

Sincerely, *Forage Focus* Editor - Paul Peterson, University of Minnesota