Cattleman Meeting Moved and Mooooving

Awhile back, Phil Blevins and I talked about the need to get some dates for the 2024 Smyth Washington Cattleman’s Association meetings on the calendar so we, along with the members could make plans to attend. Well, the best laid plans of mice and men once again came into play and we had to move our next meeting to this Monday night at 6:30 PM. We also had to move locations. Usually we meet at the Washington County Fairgrounds, but Monday’s meeting will be at the 4-H Center in Abingdon.

This meeting’s topic is one that is very important to every cattleman, producing high quality forages. Improving the forage quality we offer our cattle helps our animals perform better and stay healthier while reducing purchased feed costs and improving profit margins.

Indeed, the number one trait of any highly profitable livestock farm is the operation’s ability to consistently make high quality forages. Just about anybody can make hay and put animals out on pasture, but achieving quality goals for that forage takes knowledge, planning and effort.

Forage production is all about two things: quality and tonnage. There are a lot of details involved, but basically farmers need acceptable quantity of forage at the quality required by their livestock. A great and very relevant quote from Michigan State University Extension’s forage specialist Kim Cassida is, “You can harvest high- or low-quality forage from any hayfield or pasture depending on harvest management.”

That idea gets to the heart of harvesting quality forage. The maturity stage of the plants to be harvested has a very important impact on the resulting hay or pasture quality. Earlier harvest or grazing results in higher protein and digestibility. Later harvest or grazing results in lower nutrition content of the feed but greater yield. So, yield per acre (tonnage) is also affected by harvest management, and there are trade-offs between quality and yield.

The type and quality of forage needed on any farm depends on the type of livestock being fed or the demands of the market for forages harvested for sale. Dairy farms need higher quality forages than most other livestock farms and within each farm various groups of cattle will require different quality of forage. High-producing lactating cattle require very high quality forage. Forage production on most Michigan dairy farms focuses on corn silage and alfalfa to meet that need. Dairy heifers and dry cows require less nutritious feed as compared to lactating cows. Dry and “steam-up” cows are often fed low-potassium forage to avoid metabolic problems.

Stored forage may consist of dry hay in the form of small, square bales or large round or square bales at 14-18 percent moisture, lower for larger bales. Forage may also be ensiled as haylage at around 60-65 percent moisture by piling in a bunker and compacting to remove as much oxygen as possible, then covering with an airtight liner. Haylage may also be stored in ag bags, a more flexible system for smaller farms requiring specialized equipment.

Baleage is made with large bales, usually drier than haylage at around 40-55 percent moisture. The hay is formed into large round or square bales after partial wilting in the field, then wrapped either individually or in rows with airtight plastic. The hay is preserved very well as long as the plastic wrap remains intact. Baleage also requires some special equipment and works very well on small farms where higher quality hay is desired, fields are small and adequate drying time in the field for dry hay is a problem.

For beef cattle, horses and other species, a mixture of grass and legume is often the desired crop. If the percent of legumes, such as clovers or alfalfa is around 35-40 percent, enough nitrogen should be captured by the legumes and cycled through the soil to provide for the grasses that cannot produce their own nitrogen. Including legumes in grassy hay and pasture will also increase the protein content of the resulting forage. However, annual removal of forages without replacing potassium, phosphorus and other nutrients will result in depleted soils, incapable of maintaining acceptable forage stands and yields. In these instances, weeds tend to take over and crowd out the desirable grasses and legumes.

Upcoming Events

Feb 26 Smyth Washington Cattleman Association Meeting, Washington Co Fairgrounds 6:30

Mar 19 VQA Sale

Mar 25 VQA Steer Take Up

Mar 26 Smyth Washington Cattleman Association Meeting, Washington Co Fairgrounds 6:30

Mar 27 VQA Heifer Take Up

April 15 Smyth Washington Cattleman Association Meeting, Washington Co Fairgrounds 6:30

Jun 13-15 OGATA Summer Tractor Show, Fairview Homestead, 908 Hillman Hwy, Abingdon

July 1-5 Smyth County 4-H Camp, sign-ups and deposits being taken now!

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at (276) 783-5175/TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.

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