Free or Purchased: Hay Can Be a Problem

The generosity of our friends and neighbors across the Commonwealth, even across the Nation has been nothing short of overwhelming in response to our farms affected by Hurricane Helene. Some of the biggest challenges have been trying to slow people down so that their donations were directed to those most in need.

To that end, if you have lost hay, there are people to help you restore what you have lost. At the same time if you need hay because you haven’t purchased any yet, the donation system is not where you need to be. As hard hit as many of our Smyth County farms were, there are areas where they not only lost hay, they lost the road to the farm for deliveries.

The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) has an online system to help you find hay to purchase. The Virginia Hay Clearing House can be found at <https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/pdf/hay.pdf> .

No matter how you get hay for your animals, there are a few conditions and concerns of which you need to be aware.

On the positive side, bringing in hay that was not taken from your farm brings in nutrients that can help your soils. Baling hay is not only about collecting food for animals, it is also a mining operation, removing nutrients from the field and delivering those same nutrients to the land where it is fed.

Every time you make hay, you remove at least 50 units of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and Potassium (K) from the field. By contrast, grazing animals remove only about 5 units of NP and K per year; therefore, collecting two cuttings from a field uses up the same amount of nutrients (from fertilizer and other sources) as does 20 years of grazing.

As much as you might gain, there are some issues that can arise from feed that is introduced to your farm.

Hay or grain that you did not raise yourself can introduce weeds that you are unfamiliar with and are hard to control. For example, #2 US Shelled Corn can contain up to 15% foreign material by law. That material can be wood screws, rat manure or weed seed, among other things.

In 1987, my own farm had a serious drought. We had to cut nearly all of our corn for silage and had very little left over to pick for grain. We bought shelled corn, and in that corn was a good amount of velvetleaf seed. To make matters worse, to stretch our silage, we chopped rye haylage the next spring and were about three weeks later than normal getting our corn back out in the spring of 1988.

Velvetleaf thrives on sunlight and one easy way to control it is to plant early and let the corn shade the ground below. That spring, our corn was too young to cover the area in between the rows so we had an explosion of this weed we’d never seen before. The silage in some portions of the fields we harvested in the fall of 1988 was black with velvetleaf seed.

Long story short, we paid for the drought of 1987 recovery well into the spring of 1989 and we still have remnants of velvetleaf on the farm. I found some growing at our dry cow barn this summer that was at least 12 feet tall.

Another issue with hay that is brought in is that insects can be hitching a ride as well. Lee County has a serious fire ant issue and one of the suspected ways those little devils found their way into the county was in mounds of dirt inside rolls of hay.

In the end, there is no such thing as a free lunch… for man nor beast!

Upcoming Events

Oct 19 Clinch Mountain Tractor Show, Lebanon

Nov 5 VQA Sale 7pm Be advised the old call in number may be unavailable

Nov 11 VQA Steer take up

Nov 13 VQA Heifer take up

Nov 18 Private Pesticide Recertification Course, Extension Office 6 PM

Nov 20 Private Pesticide Recertification Course, Extension Office 8 AM

Dec 2 VQA Sale

Jan 7, 2025 VQA Sale

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 276-706-8339 /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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