

Hay Testing: The Nutrition Label for Cows

Strolling through the aisles at your local grocery store, you can make educated decisions on what foods to buy and eat. Food labels can tell us the ingredients of the foods we eat, as well as the nutritional value of those foods. Most people would choose not to buy and eat mystery foods with no label or nutritional value, so why do we choose to do this for our livestock? Your local extension office can offer ways to get your hay and livestock feed tested for protein, fat, and other important nutritional values to keep your livestock healthy and growing.

As winter approaches Southeast Kansas, cattle will begin to be pulled from summer and fall pasture, and put in stockpiled grasses or dry lots to be supplemented feed throughout the winter. Most producers rely on stacks of hay bales and feed stores to keep their cattle fed until spring, but do they really know what they are feeding? Much of this year's hay crop was put up late due to an overly wet spring. We can expect the feed value of this year's hay to be significantly less than normal, but it is important to know what those numbers are exactly in order to properly supplement feed and get optimal growth and condition on your cattle.

Hay and feed testing is a great tool to have when setting those winter rations. Knowing the protein and relative feed value of your hay will determine how much of the other supplements you will need to maintain condition on your momma cows, or get profitable growth on your stockers. Your local extension office has the tools and recourses you need to properly take these samples, and get them sent to the correct labs for testing.

Do you need to test your feed? Many producers use the same feed program each year and don't think its necessary to change. One simple way to know if your feed program is working is with body condition scoring. Knowing how to score your cows condition is important when determining if the feed program is working. The optimal range to keep your breeding cows at is a BCS of 5 or 6. If your cows are consistently scoring below that, than you can be sure you are missing something in your feed. If your cows are consistently coring above that range, chances are you are wasting money and feeding too much of something. In both cases, it is important to get your feed tested in order to feed a quality, yet economical feed ration.

Similar methods can be used to determine if your rations are working for your weaned and stocker calves. Having a target daily weight gain can help you determine if you are feeding your calves properly. If your calves are consistently gaining less than expected, or if they are growing outside of their means, feed testing could help you make the necessary adjustments to meet your daily rate of gain goals.

Knowing your operations goals, the cows' needs, and the nutritional value of the feed you have can help to make feeding decisions throughout the winter. The Southwind district is proud to offer hay sampling probes for your use and are able to help get your samples sent to the labs properly. If you would like more information on the recourses we offer, contact your local extension office.