Undesirable weather slows down hay production

June 25 2009

Spring weather has been less than favorable for harvesting hay, keeping many Indiana hay producers out of their fields, said Keith Johnson, Purdue Extension forage specialist.

"There was a period in late May that was suitable for harvesting hay, but for whatever reason many producers did not get their hay cut," he said. "Now producers need to focus on getting the hay harvested. Producers who started in late May are starting their second harvest."

As of June 14, 23 percent of Indiana's alfalfa crop was still waiting to be harvested, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agriculture Statistics Service crop and weather report released June 15.

Producers can take steps to make sure they are ready to cut hay when the ideal time comes, Johnson said.

First they should have a properly set mower conditioner that sufficiently crimps the stems and does not bruise the leaves.

"Keep in mind that there are two types of conditioners, a flail and rubber rolls," Johnson said. "The flail mower is more aggressive with the crop, so using a flail mower on a legume like alfalfa is not recommended because more leaf loss will occur."

Producers also should consider the optimal time to use a tedder - a fingerlike rake used to fluff hay after it has been laid in a swath. The

tedder is an aggressive piece of equipment that is more useful when the hay crop has more than 50 percent moisture content. If the hay crop has a low moisture content and the tedder is used, the hay has a greater potential of losing nutritional value from the leaves.

Making bale silage is another option farmers have, Johnson said. Having the correct amount of wrap, a bale wrapper and baling the hay at 50 percent moisture content is essential to making this happen. Farmers can wrap in a single bale or in a row of bales.

Farmers harvesting their fields the traditional way should consider moisture content. If baling into small rectangular bales, the moisture content should be 20 percent. Large rectangular bales and large round bales should be at 18 percent moisture content. Higher moisture levels will result in moldy hay. Farmers should use a propionic acid preservative, which permits hay to be packaged at a slightly higher moisture content during baling.

After harvesting, the field may need to be fertilized, Johnson said.

"A soil test can tell you what nutrients the forage needs to improve yield and persistence in a perennial crop," he said.

Along with maintaining the soil of the hay field, insect scouting is important, too.

Producers with alfalfa fields will need to scout for potato leafhopper, an insect carried to Indiana in the spring by weather systems from the southeastern United States. There are alfalfa varieties available that are up to 70 percent resistant to the potato leafhopper.

Because of the isolated and pop-up thundershowers across the state, Johnson encourages producers to check the weather forecast at least

twice a day and look at the extended forecast in and outside of their local area.

Provided by Purdue University (news : web)