Meadow hay

Department of Agriculture, Western Australia
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MEADOW HAY

THE nutritive value of pasture is high in early spring and remains so until early flowering. After this the protein content falls rapidly, the fibre content rises and the plants become more lignified and their digestibility reduced.

For high quality hay the pasture should be cut at early flowering and cured as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately decisions at hay cutting are not as simple as this. Most farmers wait for suitable hay making weather before cutting and the pasture could be at an advanced stage of maturity when the weather becomes suitable.

Suitable Weather
Pasture species are important in this respect. Early flowering clovers such as Yarloop may be ready for cutting before the weather is suitable whereas later strains such as midseason could be ready for cutting when the weather is fine enough for hay making.

Grazing
Grazing management of the paddocks also plays an important part. If the paddock has been well grazed during August or even early September it will reach a suitable stage for hay cutting later in the year which may coincide with good weather.

About eight weeks is long enough for the hay paddock to be closed up before cutting. This would set the closing time between the end of August and the third week in September, depending on the paddock.

Quality of Hay
The proportion of stem to leaf largely determines the quality of hay. If the pasture is allowed to grow rank before cutting the proportion of stem is increased and the quality is reduced. Short dense pasture is more valuable for hay.

Grade for Quality
Hay should be graded for quality when it is baled. The best quality hay is more suitable for autumn and early winter feeding and the lower quality hay is best used during the winter months when protein is supplied by the green pasture and when fibre is needed in the diet. If the hay is stacked with this in mind it will be more profitably used when fed out.

Hay should not be cut from the same paddocks each year. It is best to plan ahead early in the year to select and prepare paddocks for hay cutting later in the season.

Potash
Large quantities of potash are removed with hay crops. Paddocks which show symptoms of potash deficiency should be topdressed with 1 cwt. of muriate of potash per acre in the year after the hay cut.

Potash deficiency symptoms appear in irregular patches throughout the paddock.

Spring Grazing of Paddocks
Most farms are understocked during the spring when there is a flush of paddock feed. This is so even though some of the farm is closed up for hay and young growing stock are eating more pasture.

Spring pasture growth often cannot be controlled by grazing animals and a lot of pasture will grow rank before drying off. This dry feed for summer grazing is low in protein and high in fibre content. In addition the fibre becomes lignified and less digestible.

The short regrowth made after silage cutting, or heavy grazing, will be more valuable as summer feed than the tall