Alfalfa Harvest Timing for Highest Returns. (C06-orloff194851-Oral)

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Abstract:

The maturity of alfalfa at harvest has a profound effect on profitability. Producers in the West must decide whether to aim for high forage quality to receive a premium price or to maximize yield and receive a lower price per ton. Research over 5 years has focused on the yield/quality tradeoff for the intermountain region of California to identify the most profitable harvest timing. Alfalfa was harvested every 2 to 4 days over two cuttings to quantify the daily rate of change in yield and forage quality. Yield increase averaged 88 and 123 kg/ha per day on first and second cutting, respectively. Forage quality declined as maturity advanced--acid detergent fiber increased 0.33 and 0.4 percentage points per day on first and second cutting, respectively. These data were used to model gross returns based upon USDA price data. The most profitable cutting timing varied depending on market conditions and the rate of change in yield and quality for that cutting. In general, it was best to time harvest to produce high quality when a large price spread between quality grades existed. When the price spread between grades was less and temperatures resulted in rapid changes in yield and quality, it was more profitable to delay harvest and aim for high yield.

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