

Hay Options – when you're short on hay

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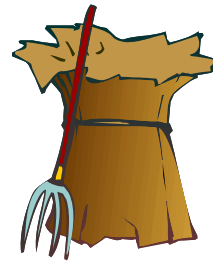
Sometimes winter and spring weather conditions reduced spring forage growth, and producers find they have too many livestock for the amount of feed they have stored away. Some are able to overcome these issues, but others may need options if they are short on grass hay.

Purchase Hay

The first thing you might want to try is to buy grass hay. It is advisable to have the hay tested so you know the nutrient content. When you compare that to the nutrient requirement of the type and class of animals you will be feeding, you will be able to adjust the diet to meet the animals needs for growth, milk, maintenance, etc. The OSU Extension Service has a hay probe you can borrow so you can sample the hay. The samples can then be sent to a lab for analysis.

Alfalfa Hay

Alfalfa hay may be an option for some. It is usually higher in protein and energy than grass hay, but sometimes available at a lower cost. It is possible that some rained on alfalfa hay would meet the nutrient requirements of your livestock. Alfalfa may be fed at strategic times like after lambing or calving. Test hay to be sure it meets nutrient requirement of the animals you are feeding.



Straw and Seed Screenings

Another option in times of forages shortages is to feed grass straw or grass screening pellets from the Willamette Valley. There are two things you should be aware of when buying grass straw.

If you choose to buy fescue or ryegrass straw from, make sure it is low-endophyte or blend it with another feed so the total diet is low in endophyte concentration. As you may know, endophytes are a type of fungus that helps protect the plant from disease. They are bred into turf grass type fescues but are toxic to livestock. The forage-type fescues and ryegrass sold in Oregon are endophyte-free. Information on endophyte testing and tolerances by livestock is available.

Also, make sure you check is the nutrient content of the straw. If the straw is 5-8% protein and your lactating cows require 10% protein, you will need to supplement the grass straw to meet the needs of the animal. Feed some feeder quality alfalfa hay (5 – 8 lbs) along with the grass straw. You can get information on balancing rations for protein content from the Extension office.

Stockpiled Forage

Although the nutritive value of mature forage that is standing in the field can be very low, cows, sheep, and other ruminants can use this if a small amount of supplemental protein is fed. Consider renting mature pasture and supplement with alfalfa hay or other protein source (soybean meal or cottonseed meal for example). You don't have to feed the protein supplement every day. Protein supplements are actually used more efficiently if you feed a double dose every other day, or three times the daily amount every three days. Labor costs, as well as feed efficiency, are improved.

Grain

Feeding some grain is another way to conserve forage. Depending on the cost of grain and hay, it may or may not be more expensive. Slowly adapt the animals to grain diets by substituting a few pounds of grain for a few pounds of hay. Every few days increase the amount of grain in the diet, until you reach the desired grain level. This could be done over a period of 2 – 3 weeks.

For example, a 1,200 lb cow will eat about 30 lb of feed (2.5% of her body weight) each day. She could be transitioned from an all-forage diet to a diet of 20 lb of forage and 10 lb of grain. If you need to feed more grain, take more time (3 –4 weeks) to slowly adapt her to the diet. Ruminants require at least 10% of the diet as forage (pasture or hay) for a functional digestive system. A high grain diet contains more energy than the most mature cows needs. Although the cows need for feed will be satisfied, she will probably gain weight on this diet.

Diet Changes

Make any diet changes slowly so as not to upset the animal's digestive system, especially if adding grain. Major changes

should be done over a two-week period, stepping up slowly.

Reduce Animal Numbers

Consider culling undesirable animals. Have your veterinarian pregnancy check your cows and ewes and get rid of the open ones now while market conditions are favorable. Cows are normally culled in the late summer or early fall after calves are weaned, and therefore the market is flooded and prices lower at that time compared to the winter or spring months.

If you are feeding animals with low nutrient requirements (dry cows and ewes, bulls and rams, over-wintering calves) good quality hay alone will probably be the least expensive ration. But, if you are feeding animals with higher requirements (lactating cows and ewes, replacement heifers and ewe lambs) or using low quality forage (poor quality hay or grass straw/screening pellets) you will need to add supplemental protein and energy. If feeding low quality hay, using grain may cost less than using higher quality hay (alfalfa or high quality grass hay) to make up the additional nutrients required for satisfactory animal performance. Check prices carefully before choosing a ration.