Hay Contest and Hay Judging Pointers and Considerations
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1. Contest organizers and instructions to contestants should be clear on what hay classes, hay attributes, and grower or management attributes (if any) are being rewarded, and what the educational value is supposed to be. With so many options in hay management, marketing, and end-use applications, it can be very difficult to use a standard judging form for all possibilities even within a cutting of a species (e.g., 1st cutting alfalfa as dairy, feeder, feed store, export, wet-preserved, etc.).

Be clear on any conditions that will disqualify an entry from a class, such as excessive grass (in alfalfa), legume (in grass), or moisture concentration (judges’ discretion, but should be pre-determined).

Particular issues to consider are whether a class of hay is being judged on the basis of economic value (animal performance potential or sensory/ornamental appeal); breadth of marketability (small-lot sales to more dynamic specialty markets vs. volume sales to more stable commodity markets); livestock feeding and health value (if this is the judging criterion, what proportion of the total diet is hay, and will it be blended from different lots?); evidence that the grower runs a progressive and sustainable enterprise; and extent to which the contest is meant to set the stage for possible future targets in hay management and utilization. Tailoring judging sheets and weightings of lab and sensory scoring to specific hay classes and end-use applications makes for clearer contests and judging and a more educational event.

2. If contest entries are supposed to be representative of forage products that are available in the marketplace or that are being fed routinely to livestock (as opposed to specially-handled ‘contest hay’), this should be stated in the contest rules and participants should sign an acknowledgement that their hay is from a commercial lot (in terms of practices and/or scale) that was or could be made available to an interested end-user, i.e. is one of many such bales from a field, stack, or load. If contest organizers operate on an honor system involving signed statements, this should eliminate need for any caps on possible quality points like RFQ or stem length, unless caps relate to generally-recognized limits that hay should not exceed from a livestock health or environmental quality perspective (e.g., excessive CP or insufficient effective fiber). If judges have strong reason to believe that an entry is not in compliance with a signed statement, they should reserve the right to eliminate the entry from consideration.

3. For effective judging, it is useful to:

   a. Survey bales prior to judging and agree on a few reference bales for color, texture, leafiness, and stem diameter, etc. Time constraints may not allow this and it will only be necessary for individuals that do not judge hay frequently or who have not worked together before and need to learn each other’s perspectives. These reference bales can be used for recalibration of sensory scoring throughout the day.
b. Decide ahead of time whether absolute or relative scales will be used for color and texture and condition, and whether scales will be uniform across all hay classes or tailored individually to each hay class (e.g., stem size in 1st vs. subsequent cuttings of alfalfa).

c. Have each entry probed for moisture, preferably with at least two probes, and display these values on cards attached to the entries. Also record these on the scoring sheets.

d. Decide ahead of time on how to penalize noxious weeds vs. weed seeds and high-moisture bales. It may be necessary to distinguish among high-moisture bales that are likely to remain stable due to wrapping and/or preservative treatment or fermentation, vs. likely to heat, spoil, collapse in stacks, or catch fire.

e. Be aware of the implications of penalty assessments on final weighted scores of lab and sensory analyses. If, for example, lab score is 70% of the total final score, lab value of an early-cut entry may overwhelm any sensory penalty due to weeds or excessive moisture, such that the bale still places well or wins. Judges need to be able to apply severe penalties, if warranted, during sensory analysis so that final weighted scores reflect the condition that was being penalized.

f. Having judges agree on an average score for each variable as they go can save time, vs. having them each independently judge and fill out sheets that need to be averaged by an organizer.

g. Take time to educate the audience as time permits when particularly good examples of judging criteria are found, like excellent or objectionable odor, presence of rocks, soil, crowns, or old stubble, preservative-treated or fermented hay, material that went through a re-cutter at baling, ideal growth stages for grasses and legumes to meet different end-uses, etc. It is also useful to discuss how a range of hay classes and qualities for different end-uses and markets is possible from multiple cuttings from the same field in a growing season, and the compatibility of this with stand persistence, profitability, and risk reduction.