



Tips For a Successful Forage Harvest

By John McGregor, MFGA Extension Support

Over the years we have had Dan Undersander speak at numerous forage meetings throughout the province. Last winter he spoke at the Great Lakes Forage and Grazing Conference sponsored by the Michigan Forage Council on **Advances in Haymaking**.

With haying season upon us, there are a number of things we can do right, and on a timely basis, that will help make this year's harvest more successful.



1 Dan Undersander (center) at the Steinbach Forage Day

Here are Dan's main points summarized below:

1. **Take first cutting by plant height.** Producers should measure the height at the top of the plant stem, not the tip of the leaflet. Consider harvesting crops at a height that obtains the best compromise between yield and quality . Research findings show a **daily** change of -0.25 percent in crude protein, +0.36 percent in acid detergent fiber and +0.43 percent in neutral detergent fiber as the alfalfa matures.
2. **Use the widest swath possible (more than 70 percent of cut area)** when cutting for faster drying and higher forage quality. The wide swath provides the best opportunity for alfalfa plants to lose the first 15 percent water as fast as possible. Conditioning is necessary for hay but not haylage. Alfalfa and alfalfa/grass mixtures for hay should be conditioned with a roller conditioner, not a flail conditioner.
3. **Reduce the amount of leaf loss in alfalfa.** Retaining the most leaves possible has been a long standing recommendation by forage experts. Alfalfa leaves are 15-20 percent neutral detergent fiber whereas the stems are 55-75 percent neutral detergent fiber. Making sure machines are

adjusted correctly for the proper operating speed has the largest effect on reducing leaf loss at harvest.

4. **Bale at the proper moisture levels to prevent mold growth and heating in storage.** For square bales, the general recommendations are: small squares 19 percent moisture or less, medium square bales (3 feet x 3 feet) less than 16 percent, and for large square bales (4 feet x 4 feet) less than 14 percent moisture. For round bales, the general recommendations are: small rounds (4 feet wide x 5 feet high) less than 18 percent moisture, medium rounds (5 feet wide x 5 feet high) less than 16 percent moisture, and large (5 feet wide x 6 feet high) less than 15 percent moisture.
5. **Remove hay/haylage from the field as rapidly as possible to minimize wheel traffic damage.** Research shows there is a 6 percent per day reduction in yield of the next cutting for every day the field is driven over after cutting. Wheel tracks will damage the crown buds that produce the next cutting's growth. Producers that tend to leave bales in the field for several days following baling will sacrifice yield unless they pick up bales immediately.

For more information on successful hay management go to [High Quality Hay Management](#)