



Haylage vs Hay

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One of the things that we see year after year is that getting first cut hay off in a timely manner is difficult. This year again was a reminder that June rains can and do cause loss of quality to swathed hay and/or overly mature standing hay. 2022 also reminded us of the difficulty in getting dry hay up when we don't have a four-five day window without rain.

If we take a look at the number of days with/without rain using Carman and Brandon as examples, we see from June 10 to August 22 there was rainfall 26 out of 62 days. Of the 46 dry days there were approximately 5 four-day windows without rain, which doesn't leave much opportunity to get dry hay.

Timely harvests can result in high-quality forage, proper baling and storage preserves nutrients like energy and protein. But hay quality is never guaranteed.

There are a number of techniques that producers employ to shorten the drying period of cut hay and most of these are part of the [Hay in a Day](#) management practices. These include conditioning, wide swathes, cutting early in the day and raking in an effort to get hay to dry down quickly.

All of these techniques either together or separately help speed the drying process of cut forages.

Another practice that has been around for a number of years is the practice of making haylage or baleage.

When trying to bale hay at 12% to 18% moisture, a shower can add additional days of drying and nutrient loss to an otherwise successful cutting. With this in mind, many producers are wrapping their cut forage at about 45-60 percent moisture and allowing that forage to ferment, creating haylage.

Getting hay put up without loss of quality due to rain or delayed cutting improves quality. Haylage can in some instances increase those chances.

Haylage can also have a similar or improved quality when compared to dry hay.

A study out of the University of Georgia wanted to look at whether or not different breeds of cattle utilize forages differently. The groups were fed ryegrass hay and ryegrass haylage throughout the trial.

The chart below shows the nutrient composition of the two forages and though they are not exactly the same they are very similar on a dry matter bases.

Table 1. Nutrient composition of Ryegrass hay and Haylage.

	Dry Hay	Haylage
Nutrient, %		
DM	89.7	51.2
OM	90.0	89.6
CP	12.4	11.9
NDF	69.4	68.3
ADF	41.1	42.0
TDN	56.9	56.2

The study was looking at whether cattle breeds utilized forages differently and the conclusion was that there was no correlation between breed and nutrient digestibility.

What the study did find was that there was a difference between type of feed and nutrient digestibility.

Dry matter (DM) and organic matter (OM) digestibility was 19% greater for steers consuming haylage compared to hay. The digestibility of DM and OM was improved largely due to the 21 percent increase in total tract digestibility of neutral detergent fiber.

To help explain these improvements the researchers think that it may be due to the softening of the fibers in haylage due to fermentation and/or it could be a shorter lag time of microbial attachment to fiber.

Either way the researchers recommend considering the benefits of better nutrient digestibility in haylage against the added costs for this type of production.