

Harvesting Ditch Hay

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When conditions are as dry as they are across most of Manitoba, producers are scrambling to find forage to get their livestock thru this summer and into next spring. One way to help supplement this shortage may be to harvest ditches along roadways. Ditch hay, while not ideal, could provide additional tonnage to your winter feed supplies and be a cost effective alternative to your stockpiled forage if done correctly.



1 source Hay and Forage Grower

So what do you need to consider before putting up ditch hay?

First, I would suggest that you check with your local government (RM) and/or highways department to see if there are any permits or permissions required to cut and bale hay along roadsides.

Secondly, before you start cutting make sure that the ditch is tractor safe to avoid a roll over situation. Many ditches have steep inclines that aren't safe for the standard wheel width of most field tractors and/or haying equipment.

Below are some important considerations outlined by A. Garcia, South Dakota State University, if you are planning to harvest ditch hay,

Is the ditch safe and clean for baling?

Check the area to ensure it is clean of garbage such as bottles, cans, plastic, etc. This material could end up in the bales fed to cattle or damage the harvesting equipment.

If the hay is going to be sold, the reputation of the seller and/or harvester and the satisfaction of the buyer are on the line.

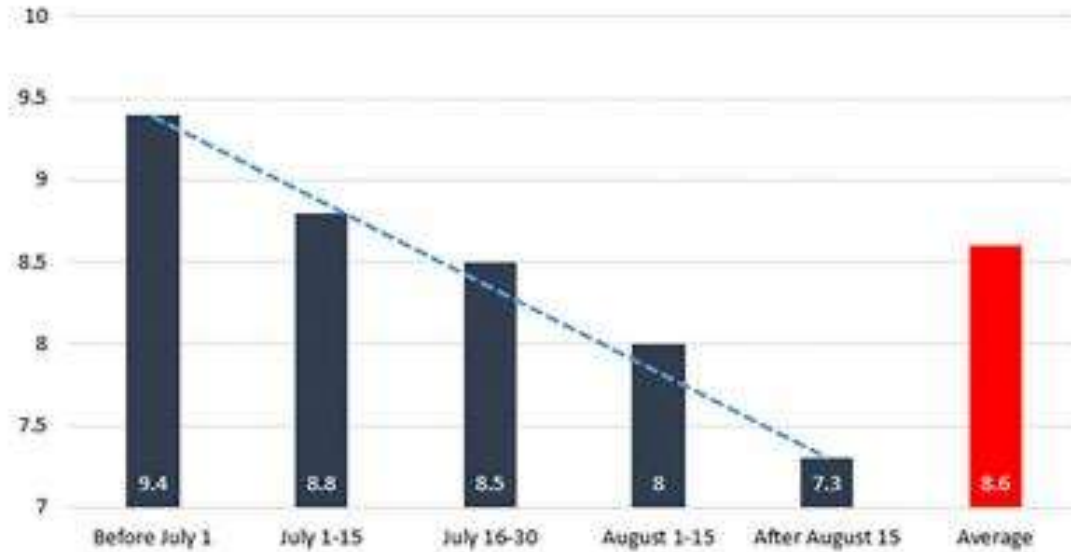
Metals consumed can be deadly to cattle. So this step, while time-consuming and tedious, could save a lot of heartache later on.

What is the nutrient quality of the ditch hay?

Under ideal conditions, it would be advisable to test the bales at least for crude protein (CP) and Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN) and balance diets accordingly. Since there is quite a large variability in nutrient content between bales this is unlikely and using

average nutrient composition values can oftentimes result in unbalanced diets. This high variability in nutrient content poses challenges in assessing the feeding value of ditch hay. The reason for this variability, however, doesn't seem to be as much the plant species composition, but rather the time of harvest.

The chart below shows crude protein in ditch hay by harvest date.



Source: Modified from 2016 North Dakota Beef Report.

How should I formulate a feed ration using ditch hay?

It's common for producers to skip nutrient testing on ditch hay but one alternative to overcome the lack of lab reports is to formulate diets using the lowest likely analytical value for a particular nutrient in the hay and balance the diet for the lower end of the animal requirements for each particular nutrient. By using this approach, under the worst-case scenario the requirements of the animal will be covered, and any underestimation in protein and/or energy in the hay will result in increased animal performance. In the study (above chart) the ditch hay consisted mostly of cool season grasses (smooth brome grass) and the author felt that based on the data it seemed safe to formulate rations using conservative values for ditch hay of 8.5 percent CP and 52 percent TDN. Producers can then adjust, gradually cutting supplementation back until the desired growth, body condition and/or weight are attained. Mineral should always be available.

Has the ditch been sprayed for weeds?

This may not be a big concern in most areas but as a precaution if your local municipality does carry out a roadside spraying program you may want to check if the area you are planning on harvesting has been sprayed and what was used.

There's a two-fold concern with herbicides.

First, several are not cleared to be used as forage to be fed to livestock.

Second, some broadleaf herbicides sprayed on ditch hay fed to cattle are eliminated intact in the manure. Picloram (commercial names: Tordon, Grazon, and Pathway) and clopyralid (commercial names: Stinger, Curtail, and Transline) are popular herbicides used to control broadleaf weeds along roadways. These herbicides can carry over in the manure and if applied to crop fields can affect subsequent broadleaved crops for up to two years.

Though ditch hay might come at a favorable price point, the road right-of-way is also wrought with peril for both machinery and cow. The rear bumper off an '86 Chevy offers little feed value and may just be downright traumatic (and expensive) for a mower-conditioner.