

Bone Dry Ridge

A little bit of everything farm



Summer 2011 news from Bone Dry Ridge

Hello All

Summer seems to never have arrived this year. There were a few days in August that kind of felt like summer, but that seems to have been it. I feel fall in the air and I wonder if this is going to be a wet or a dry fall.

I thought I would dedicate this newsletter to the subject of Hay. The last two years have been very difficult haying years, and as a result the price of hay is very high. The weather is of course the main factor. La Nina years are tough on all farmers in the Northwest. It is very hard on those who rely on good hay to sustain their animals over winter.



I like to put the subject of haying into two categories. Irrigated haying fields and non-irrigated haying fields. Since dairy cows need very high quality hay to be good producers of milk, most of the irrigated fields, on the West side of the Cascade, are at dairies. It is very expensive to get an irrigation system for your farm. You not only need a lot of \$\$, you also need to get permission for an irrigation well, and to get water rights. You also need to have enough groundwater to make the whole thing worthwhile.

Therefore most of the haying is done on non-irrigated fields. Very good hay can be gotten from non-irrigated fields but it depends a lot on Mother Nature.

Here is what a perfect haying year looks like: it starts with a dry, warm late spring (May). Farmers can go into their fields and get the first cutting. Since this hay can practically never be turned into dry hay, because it is hardly ever that dry in May, it most often gets turned into silage. It either gets hauled to the farm and put into so-called Silage Pits, or it is made into the big white or green marshmallows, that I'm sure many of you have seen around the countryside. Making silage is very tricky. Too much moisture is bad and not enough moisture is also bad. Most of the silage is fed to dairy animals. But feeding silage is also tricky. A whole big marshmallow needs to get eaten within three days or bad mold can start growing in the silage and sicken the animals and cause abortions.

Getting that first cut of hay is very good because there still is enough moisture in the ground for a second cutting. This is the hay most of us meat producers want to get. Here we need Mother Nature to cooperate again. Good warm rain in June is wonderful. This makes the grass grow well, so after the 4th of July, farmers can go out again and get the best hay there is. July therefore needs to be hot and dry. I'm sure you are aware that this has not been the scenario over the last two years. Cool wet summers make for terrible hay making.

Since making and feeding silage is so tricky, most dry land farmers don't deal with it at all and depend on taking just one cutting of hay in early July. This does not make for the best quality hay, but the cost of making hay is so high, and if you don't have any way of using the silage, haying in July is your best choice. In early July the grasses are just about overripe. This means the grass plant has spent most of its energy on making a seed head and the stock to hold it up. If the fields have not been fertilized the grasses go to seed faster. Fertilized fields make the plant fat and happy and it feels it has plenty of time to go to seed, and therefore spends a long time growing its leaves. Most of the nutrition is in the grass leaves and in the seeds themselves. But the stock that holds the seeds is just roughage. Therefore unfertilized fields don't produce very good quality hay. A first cut Hay in August is no good. It is overripe and most of the hay bale is taken up by the seed stock which is roughage.



The last two years have been far from the ideal haying weather. Mother Nature has been rather unkind to farmers. Hay has not been very high in quality, but very expensive, because there simply is not enough to go around.

This year was even worse than last year. The rain we had in July made a lot of hay rot in the fields. The weather forecast told Farmers they had about 8 additional hours to get their hay in, but the rain came early. I was driving home from doing errands in town and noticed the dark clouds roll in. My hay (that I get from Code, my neighbor) was still un raked and therefore no chance to get that in, but some neighbors had bales out in the field, so I went there and we got every truck and every trailer we could get our hands on and got those bales in as the rain was starting to fall. I wondered why there was not some kind of an emergency measure put in place by the government, since millions of dollars were lost that day and over the next ten days as rain fell and hay rotted in the fields all over Western Washington. Hay loses about 5% of its nutritional value every day it lies out in the field. If it gets rained on, more than that is lost. If it gets rained on for three days and the weather is warm, molds start growing. You don't want to feed that to your animals!



That is my little spiel on haying. I could of course go on and on, but I have decided to never make my newsletter longer than two pages.

Have a good Fall.

Your farmer and shepherdess *Selma*