

The Ditch Hay Program

The Situation

Livestock producers across the state of North Dakota cut and bale hay within road ditch right-of-ways. Some producers within the state utilize ditch hay as their primary source of hay fed during the winter. Currently there is no baseline information assessing the quality of ditch hay or identifying the variables impacting ditch hay quality. In addition, increased activity on rural roads in some portions of the state have caused noticeable increases in dust accumulation on plants adjacent to the roads leading to more questions about nutrient quality and suitability of these roadside forages as feedstuffs for livestock species. Conversations with Extension Agents indicated a desire to increase interaction with producers in their counties by providing information that can directly relate to on-farm management decisions.

Extension Response

A program was developed that had 3 key components: training, sample collection/evaluation, and dissemination. Training meetings were conducted to standardize data and sample collection, and Extension Agents from 29 counties enthusiastically volunteered to aid in collecting and characterizing samples from 182 operations in 36 different counties. For each sample collected producers were also asked 2 key questions: 1) What is the biggest concern you face on your operation?, and 2) What else can NDSU do to help you and your operation? Samples were analyzed for nutrient content and an additional training meeting was held to focus on dissemination of results. Individual reports were returned to producers, summary presentations were developed, and project participants disseminated results via face to face meetings, internet/radio spots, and written reports to local, regional, and national audiences.

Impacts

Participating producers reported:

- 64% increase in knowledge and understanding of variation in nutrient content of ditch hay
- 57% increase in knowledge and understanding of the importance of cutting date related forage quality and quantity
- 55% increase in knowledge and understanding of the factors that impact quality of ditch hay
- 55% increase in knowledge and understanding the importance of forage testing
- 36% intend to make management changes as a result of program participation

Follow-up surveys of participating agents revealed:

- 100% had increased interactions with producers as a result of the project
- 92% indicated that project participation initiated additional conversations about herd management
- 100% indicated the project allowed them to contact producers they hadn't previously worked with
- 84% used skills or knowledge obtained in program to address questions from producers not involved in sampling efforts
- 50% presented results at Extension meetings

Feedback

From Producers:

"I plan to cut earlier and test quality of hay"

"Excellent presentation to help our ranching neighbors"

From Extension Agents:

"Like the concept of hay sampling and discussing results to open a learning path with producers"

"Do it again, I had so many producers ask again about hay testing! This was great!"

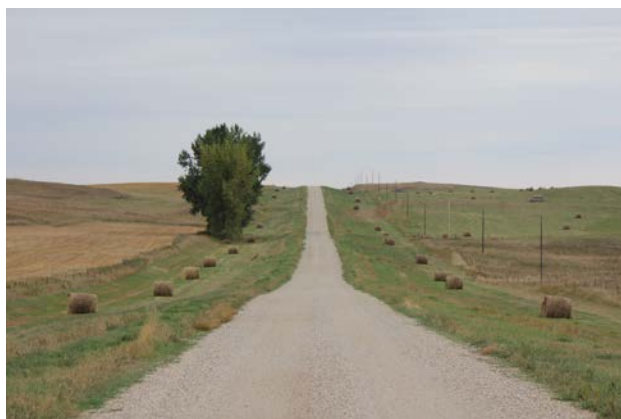
Public Value Statement

Results of this effort provided valuable feedback to producers throughout the state regarding best management practices to optimize quality of an underutilized resource. The optimized quality of feed can lead to enhanced profitability, productivity, and sustainability of North Dakota Farms and Ranches.

In addition, this program provides a format for increased interaction among Extension Agents and producers in their counties, and the opportunity to reinforce and enhance nutrition-related technical expertise of our staff. Our philosophy related to improving the technical competency of Extension personnel is that **IF** we provide quality training for our county agents, **THEN** we will empower them to better serve the livestock producers of North Dakota.

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Resource Links

Report of project results in the 2016 ND Beef
Report:

<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/ansci/beef/as1815-21.pdf>