

Human foods come with a nutrition label. Your cow's food can too.

When you and I purchase food at the grocery store, we have the convenience of looking at a nutrition label to determine what is actually in the food, and how healthy or unhealthy it is. Wouldn't it be neat if we could do the same thing with the hay and grain we feed our cattle? We can! Hay and grain feeds can be sent to a feed testing lab and analyzed for their nutritional content. Forage sampling your hay and livestock feed is like reading its nutrition label rather than guessing what's in it.

The data from your feed test can be used to determine if your hay and other feeds will actually meet the nutritional requirements of your cow herd. With the rainy spring weather, we had this past year, much of our hay was baled late. It is safe to assume that its nutritional value is not great. Without testing for actual nutritional value, we are forced to guess if our hay and other feeds are nutritious enough to get cows through the winter.

Examples of situations where cattle may need a nutritional boost include calves and heifers that still need to grow and mature, cows with young calves, and spring calving cows. These animals may need more energy and protein than your hay can provide. Another potential issue would be if we have a long, cold, and wet winter. Cattle tend to fare pretty well in cold conditions, unless their haircoat stays wet for extended periods of time. In this case, average quality hay may not work. If your cattle lose a lot of weight over the winter, this is a sure sign that your hay and other feeds are not nutritionally adequate.

If you would like more information on how to sample hay and other cattle feeds, contact your local extension office. Additionally, K-State Research and Extension – Southwind Extension District agent Christopher Petty is available for farm visits in Bourbon, Neosho, Allen, and Woodson Counties to teach you how to forage sample, if needed. Petty can be reached by e-mail at cgp@ksu.edu or by telephone at 620-223-3720.