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Why's of Agriculture: How to turn hay to silage

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It wasn't long ago that we were seeing our rural roads busy with farm equipment as they moved in one field and then to the next to finish up their seeding, using machines that are bigger than my house! Little did we know at the time, we'd be driving by full fields of wheat, barley, canola and hay in no-time.

Now the growing season is in full swing. Cattle are being moved to their summer pastures where abundant grass has grown back over the spring. Crops have sprouted and are starting to look like their mature selves (though we still have time before they'll be mature enough to harvest). But then there's the hay.

Hay is a grass, or mixture of grasses like clover, alfalfa, oats, rye, etc., that are grown and harvested for animal feed often in the colder months when grass no longer grows. And since we live in Alberta and not the Bahamas, we have a relatively short growing season generally. Not too short though, we still cut the grass in our lawns on an almost weekly basis. But one thing we do often see with our lawns and hay alike, the more often we cut the grass the thicker, stronger, and faster it grows back.

Unlike lawns, we don't cut our hay fields very often. As a rule of thumb, we often try to let our hay grow until just before it goes to seed or flower. It's at that point the grass no longer 'grows' as it simply 'maintains'. And the more time we allow the hay to grow the more feed we can provide. Just before the grasses are able to reach full maturity, we cut the hay which then starts a second cycle of growth. We call this first "mow" a 1st cut, the next will be considered the 2nd cut, and so forth.

So now that the 1st cut is down, we need to do something with it. Similar to our lawns when we mow, we leave a trail of grass clippings behind. Sometimes we leave those grass clippings on the lawn to act as a thatch, or organic material that protects bare soil and acts as nutrients for future growth. More often, at least when it comes to animal feed, we collect those clippings and save them for a later date. Collected grasses from hay fields can be turned into bales, which are easy to move, store and sell. Or hay can be turned into silage.



In simplistic terms, silage is shredded hay that is stored in a pile rather than in a bale. Once cut, the silage is transferred to a storage site, the plant material is spread and packed tightly then covered, which cures the plant matter, excluding the air and the rot that comes with it. Science has shown that silage can produce additional vitamins, can improve palatability and digestibility in animals and provide them with some dietary options aside from their regular grasses (and all the treats their owners give them.. I know mine are spoiled).

Thanks again for joining me for another 'Why' or in this case 'How' of Agriculture. If you have an agricultural question you'd like me to dig into for a future article let me know at adelaney@rdcounty.ca

Learn more about spraying and agricultural life with our Year on the Farm timeline, available at www.rdcountry.ca/629/A-Year-on-the-Farm