

Top 10 Alfalfa Harvesting Tips

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The challenges hurled at agriculture continue and appear to be coming faster and harder with each turn of the calendar. Last year, while dealing with low commodity prices and one of the wettest planting seasons of all time – if not the wettest – farmers faced the ugly truth of winterkill on a substantial percentage of their alfalfa, hay, and pasture acres. Today, farmers now confront the invisible foe of a virus, a total disruption of the food supply chain, depressed markets, and a future market more unpredictable than before.

With all the uncertainty that goes along with the agricultural industry, two things will happen: crops will get planted and hay will be harvested. As alfalfa harvest season arrives, a few tips to keep in mind might help you focus on the harvest ahead and forget the chaos happening around us.

1. First and foremost, stay safe in the field. If you have weathered the COVID-19 storm, don't be careless and get injured or worse during alfalfa and hay harvest. We often get in a hurry, and if rain is coming, we try to go faster and sometimes forget to stay safe. Slow down and focus on what you are doing in the field.
2. Be sure to harvest at the proper moisture. You will have a higher-quality product if moisture is at the correct content. So, for bunker silos, bags, and piles, start harvesting when alfalfa is between 65% and 70% moisture. For tower silos, cut at 60-65% moisture; for baleage, harvest at around 35% moisture. For dry hay, make sure alfalfa is between 13% and 17% moisture.
3. Your cutting schedule is going to set the stage for the rest of the year. Cut your fields as quickly as you can to consistently capture high-quality forage. Try to avoid a cutting schedule with cuttings scattered throughout the summer – which can happen if you cut one field and get delayed a few days.
4. Make hay when the sun shines. If you get a window of dry weather, that may be the time to make the hay.
5. Work toward rapid dry down. Get alfalfa dried down to the proper moisture quickly. Make windrows as wide as possible. The quicker we can get that hay dried down to the proper moisture, the more starches, carbohydrates, and energy will be captured.
6. Avoid excess wheel traffic. Don't drive randomly across the field, and limit wheel traffic as much as possible. Five to 10 days after cutting, yield is reduced 6% for each day you are driving on the hay after cutting, usually due to breaking stems. The quicker you can get it off after cutting the better.
7. Track the quality of the growing crop. Scissor-cut, sample, or use a Predictive Equation for Alfalfa Quality (PEAQ) stick to estimate alfalfa's optimum quality for harvest. With the PEAQ stick or scissor cut, figure about 20 points less than what the current value is because of storage and harvest losses. If the value is 170 Relative Feed Value (RFV), it's actually going to feed out at 150 RFV.
8. Scout fields for plant development and pests. You can start estimating when to cut by crop scouting if you are not scissor cutting or using a PEAQ stick. Scouting provides the information to know if you should control a pest or manage the pest by harvesting the crop. Look for any diseases, yellowing or nutrition deficiencies.
9. Get your equipment set up and ready. Minimize breakdowns by making sure your tractors, mowers, choppers, balers, trucks, and wagons are maintained and ready to go.
10. Prepare storage. Make sure you have the plastic for your bunkers and piles and have bags and bagging equipment ready. Maintain packing tractors and equipment, and train operators for proper building of piles or bunkers.

