

“PURPLE IS BAD”

for best alfalfa harvest

By Mark H. Hunter

MONTE VISTA, CO., — When it comes to harvesting alfalfa, especially high-quality alfalfa for dairy cows, “purple is bad” for top results, according to Fort Collins, Colo., forage expert.

Kelli Sandberg, a dairy field service coordinator for Ranchway Feeds, told more than 100 San Luis Valley farmers and ranchers that the best time to cut their hay is just before it buds out if they want to get the best quality and price — especially from dairies.

“You guys put up the best quality hay in Colorado,” Sandberg said during the recent sixth annual Southern Rocky Mountain Forage and Livestock Conference. “My dairymen love San Luis Valley hay. They can’t get enough of it.”

San Luis Valley farmers last year harvested 165,000 acres of alfalfa hay worth nearly \$50 million and 84,000 acres of “other” hay worth \$11.5 million according to the CSU SLV Research Center.

“Superior hay must be cut at a certain time,” Sandberg said. “The optimum time to harvest is when your alfalfa is in the pre-bud stage. Once it blooms the feed value decreases rapidly.”

“Dairy producers demand premium quality forages,” Sandberg said. “Dairymen have recognized for years that the quality of the alfalfa hay affects milk production faster than any other feeding practice on the dairy.”

Sandberg encouraged producers to have their baled alfalfa tested by a National Forage Testing Association approved lab so they can get the best prices. She detailed a formula that

combines percentages of: moisture, dry matter, crude protein, Acid Detergent Fiber (ADF), Neutral Detergent Fiber (NDF), Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN), Net Energy for Lactating cows (NE/LACT), Mega-Calories per pound (MCAL/LB), and Relative Feed Value (RFV) to determine the alfalfa’s “points” used to determine its value.

The lower the ADF and NDF, the higher the RFV will be. The lower the ADF the easier it is for cows to digest, she said. Dairies like hay with less than 27 percent ADF and at least a 170 RFV value, she said.

Merlin Dillon, Extension agronomist at the SLV Research Center, suggested producers use the best alfalfa seed they can afford to produce the best crop. “Don’t buy cheap seed — go for the good stuff”

He asked the group to consider “using different crops than you have been using” in their rotation schedules, especially sorghum-Sudan grass, 54-day varieties of silage corn, or spring or winter grains such as rye, wheat or Triticale.

“Can you imagine how this kind of feed would be for cows?” Dillon asked as a slide of lush, waist-high Sudan grass was shown on a screen. “This would be pretty good feed for cows. They like it because it’s sweet.”

He cautioned producers to be careful with Sudan grass, however, because it can turn poisonous if it gets frosted.

“Winter grains make tremendous grazing and you can graze it out until August,” Dillon said. He also suggested producers plant oats into their “thin” alfalfa fields. “It’s not dairy quality but its good for cow-calf operations.”

For more information contact Merlin Dillon at (719) 754-3494