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Hay Stand Evaluations – Horizontally AND Vertically

There are (give or take...) two times a year when we really spend some time looking *down* into our cool season hay fields: once when we apply fertilizer and again when we harvest. For the rest of the year, we spend a lot of time looking *across* them, usually from a distance.

It's not that these 'horizontal' evaluations aren't beneficial. We can see differences in heading and color. This year, some of those differences have been readily visible and it hasn't taken a lot to note the variability across our stands. These horizontal evaluations may not tell the entire story, however, and that's when a more 'vertical' evaluation might be in order.

By vertical, I mean looking down from above to get another angle at the stand. For example: a lot of fields have exhibited uneven heading this year. A look across the stand may 'smooth' some of those differences, but looking down from above, even if just from the seat of the swather or tractor, can help us see things a little more clearly – from what's actually going on to the size of the affected area. The hemp dogbane masked by seed heads from the road may be clearly visible as you look down into the stand. It's a good opportunity to take note of the areas to return post-harvest to determine how to manage in the future.

In some cases, a deeper look might be necessary. Use a measuring stick to see just how much difference there is in areas of the field. Are headed areas showing a significant difference in leaf height versus areas fully headed out? What about areas with darker versus lighter colored foliage? If we use a rule of thumb like the 300 pounds of forage per inch of height estimate we use when determining grazing needs, we can start to see how differently areas of a field may be performing – and the value of doing something to address said performance.

Don't be afraid to go even deeper. Whether you stop while you're harvesting or when hauling off bales or later, the notes you made about 'that thin spot near the corner' or 'the heavy hay along the road', can help you know where to return to and see if there are surface or even subsurface reason for the differences. A soil test to compare areas is always a good idea as are tasks like pulling cores to determine depth of top soil or evaluating compaction.

Differences might be due to management for *this* season – or the result of practices of years ago. Sometimes, they show up based on weather or other factors. Sometimes they can be the start of something more significant deserving a deeper look. Start looking now to make plans (when possible) to help with stand consistency – both horizontally AND vertically.