


Tips for County Fair Judges - Forage



Wisconsin 4-H recommends that you use the following criteria to judge forage entries at county fairs.

Judging Criteria for Baled Hay Exhibits

Exhibits must be from this year's hay crop. Hay in the bale should represent the maturity of the field harvested. All hay bales must be cured, i.e., air-dried down to safe storage moisture. An exhibit represents a section of bale 2-12 inches thick, depending upon the fair. The sample should be firm, neat, and attractively packed. The exhibitor or the fair may provide clear plastic bags or some plastic bands to display the exhibit. Counties may also require the exhibitor to give the species, approximate grass percent, which crop cutting or the date cut, and the approximate stage of maturity when cut. Use these criteria when judging:

- *Maturity*: Maturity influences both yield and composition of hay. Highest quality legume hay is cut when  of the field is in bloom. Highest quality grass hay is cut before flowering. Young plants are higher in protein, minerals, and carotene than old plants. They are also more tender and palatable, and less fibrous.
- *Leafiness*: In legumes, percentage of leaves is the best index of feed value. Leaves of alfalfa hay contain over twice as much crude protein as stems; stems contain over twice as much crude fiber as leaves. Leafiness is not a major factor in grass hay.
- *Color*: A high percentage of natural green color in hay indicates early cutting, good curing, pleasant aroma, high palatability, freedom from must or mold, and a relatively high carotene content. Storage of hay causes the loss of some color, especially if the hay has a high moisture content, is tightly packed, and has poor ventilation.
- *Foreign Matter*: Bales should be free from weeds and trash.
- *Condition*: Refers to the soundness of hay when it is well cured. Unsound hay has too much moisture, has not cured properly, and smells musty or moldy.

Judging Criteria for Hay Sheaf Exhibits

Exhibits must be from this year's crop. All hay sheaf samples should be cured out at proper stage of maturity. Sheaves are exhibited by hanging upside down. Use these criteria when judging:

- *Leafiness*: Alfalfa sheaves should contain a high percentage of leaves, which represents an early cutting.
- *Condition*: The hay should be dry and properly cured. Sheaves should not smell musty or moldy.
- *Preparation of Sheaf*: Winning sheaves are built by selecting quality individual plants and carefully preserving the leaves and green color. Exhibitors should cut stems about four inches above the soil. Use the full length of the harvested plant. Place the plants in a cool, dark room to dry them to about 40% moisture. Excessive drying will cause the leaves to shatter when constructing the sheaf. Sheaves should be neatly and securely tied, usually with three bands. They should be tied tightly to measure 4-8 inches in diameter at the center band. After tying, trim the butt end of the sheaf with a fine-toothed saw, knife, or shears. Sheaves which are to be exhibited should be stored in a dry, cool, dark room by hanging upside down.
- *Maturity*: Highest quality legume hay is cut when one-tenth of the field is in bloom. Highest quality grass hay is cut before flowering.
- *Foreign Matter*: Sheaves should be free from weeds and trash.

Judging Criteria for Hay Silage Exhibits

Haylage must be fermented in a silo and come from the current crop. Fresh “green chop” is not allowed. Some county fairs require that haylage samples be exhibited in a five-quart ice cream pail or similar container with cover on. Other fairs require a clear plastic bag that is tied tightly to exclude air and retard the fermentation process. Haylage exhibits generally weigh 8-10 pounds that are representative of the forage crop. Exhibitors may be asked to include a statement about the species, approximate grass percent, which crop or cutting, date cut, stage of maturity when cut, and preservation method used. Use these criteria when judging:

- *Preservation*: Hay silage should have a natural color. It should also have a very mild, clean, slightly sharp odor and taste, which indicates the correct amount of acidity for proper preservation. A fruity odor is okay. Silage should not have a musty, moldy, or burned odor. High moisture silages are usually the ones with strong odors. If a sample feels slimy or moisture is left in your hand when you squeeze it, the silage has too much moisture.
- *Crop Quality*: Look for top crop quality when judging hay silage. Grasses and legumes have higher digestibility and contain more protein in the early stages of growth.