

Crop Soil News



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"It is the crops
that feed the
cows that make
the milk
which creates
the money."

Advanced Ag Systems
Research, Education, Consulting

Navigating the Rough Road

There is no way to sugar coat it. We are in a rough year and the spring so far has not been any help. One day of sunshine and four of cloudy, rain, and snow. We will have a small burst of normal weather and then it is forecasted to be much below normal, and the Northeast and mid Atlantic to be wet until mid May. (Read [Sunspot Weather Impact](#) to the end of the article, as the weather has and will be long term changing). We had similar weather for the past two years (see graph at end). There are a few lessons we learned from them that are still critical for this year. On any rough road, the key is to avoid the potholes.

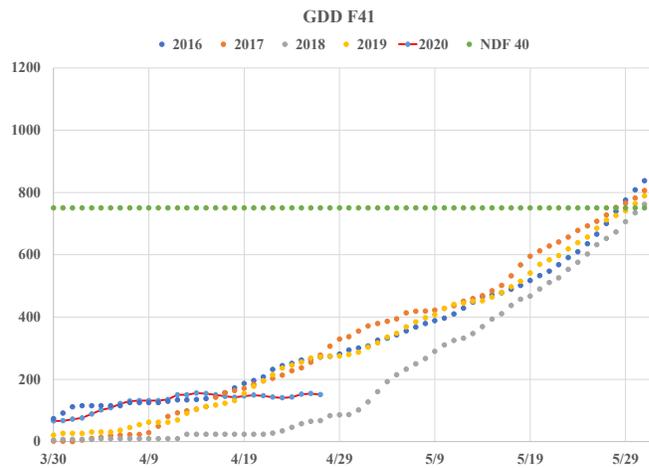
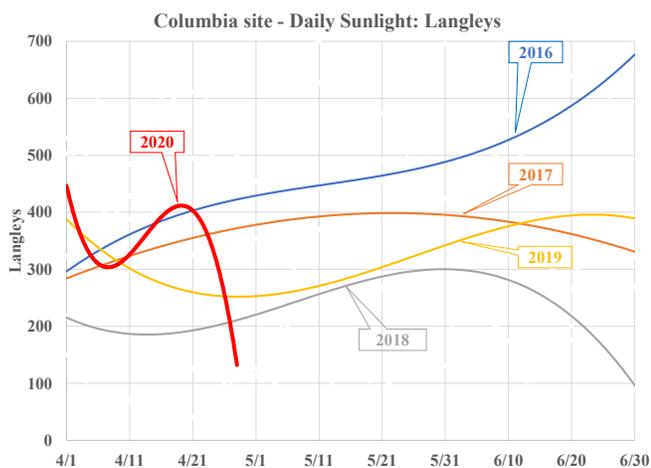
Don't panic and mud the crop into the ground. Each year someone does that and then regrets it at harvest. Over my 40+ years of working with farmers, those who waited until the soil was friable before planting came out fine. Those who mudded in had poor stands, poor growth, and completely uneconomical yield – they would have been better off leaving the seed in the bag. Yes, you are up against haylage harvest – go harvest it. Corn silage loses little quality and yield if it is planted after haylage. On the flip side, the haylage gains 1 NDF/ day as it goes past maturity, which **loses .55 lbs. of milk/cow/day**. You can't afford to wait on haylage, you can afford to wait on corn silage.

Timeliness is everything for first cut haylage. All grass haylage is usually ready about 2 days after winter triticale (flag leaf stage) is ready to harvest. Watch the dandelions in that field, when they turn from yellow to white fuzz – it is time to mow the straight grass fields. Alfalfa grass mixes (50% grass) are ready to harvest when the alfalfa is 24 inches tall. Straight alfalfa is ready when the alfalfa is 33 inches tall. There is often a month between the all grass being ready and the all alfalfa field being ready. My latest research has found that **all clover is ready the same or even before an all alfalfa field**. Grass clover mix is ready well **before** all alfalfa. There will be a more detailed report on the critical New York Farm Viability Institute funded red clover harvest research later this summer. Of course, this is tempered with the "Art of Farming". That is where you make a judgment call – it is two days before the haylage is ready to cut and beyond that is a week of rain, go harvest. Any nutritionist can adjust to too high quality easier than too low quality.

Unfortunately, the rough road this end of April and beginning of May will have extensive rainy days, cloudy days, and lower than normal temperatures until we get well into May and it finally switches to summer. This makes it a challenge to get winter forage and haylage to the optimum 35% dry matter for ensiling. Mowing and leaving it in a windrow for 3 to 5 days is not how you make quality haylage - you are just making compost. **Wide swath same day haylage utilizing photosynthetic drying** has been proven for the past 20 years as the **fastest way to dry** haylage and winter forage. **IT IS NOT MAGIC**. We learned very early that a cloudy day will not get it dry as there is insufficient sunlight to photosynthesize which removes water. Low temperatures (usually accompanied by damp conditions), will be a challenge to get dry as biological processes drop (or increase) many times over a relatively small drop or increase in temperature. On the plus side, my data showed significantly higher temperatures in wide swath (greater than 80% of cutterbar) compared to

narrow swath, which accelerates photosynthetic drying on days the sun does shine, even if the tractor tires drive on the swath. Unfortunately, even that increase may not make up for the very cool conditions we been getting. If there is any sun, tedding two hours after mowing can make a huge difference. Tedded properly both brings up the lower shaded forage that is not drying, and dramatically decreases the density of the wide swath for more rapid moisture removal. We often find it critical for drying heavy yields of winter forage. Several years ago, we had a wet spring and a farmer that bought a big tedder reported that was the only way he got his haylage in at correct moisture. All his neighbors wanted to borrow it so they could get theirs dry. You may even need to ted again in another two hours if you have a heavy winter forage crop or less than ideal drying conditions. Yes, it is an extra trip across the field; it adds to the cost of harvest; it takes time. The bottom line is getting forage in as top quality. Weather is against you and so do what you have to to get it right. It is critical to mow at 3.5 inches (**4 inches for grass and/or red clover**). This allows the tedder to spread without mixing dirt (mud) into the forage. That said, it still may not dry the same day as it was mowed. On the plus side, the more the night temperatures drop to the 30's F. the less energy is lost overnight and so you can get a second day to finish drying with little/less loss of energy. If it doesn't drop and forage moisture is still greater than 75%, we suggest you leave it for another day (if there is one) of drying and take the hit on forage energy. The cloudy conditions we have handicap sugar formation and so it will not ferment properly if wetter than normal. Regardless of the conditions, and your desire to run the operation on the least cost possible, I still highly suggest utilizing a homolactic inoculant – preferably one that is specifically designed for wet forages and is antagonistic to Clostridia – which could be a problem in forage this year. There are enough challenges to the crop without letting it be fermented by whatever garbage is floating around in the air.

If you think you can do as you always did to make haylage and winter forage, consider the graph below left. It is a measurement of the amount of sunshine (Langleys) we have had in the spring the past four years. A nice sunny day is 600-700 langleys. **2018, and 2019 had HALF the amount of sunshine.** The graph for 2020 looks even worse. This will affect how soon the crops will be ready, the amount (or lack) of digestibility, and the chance you can get it dry enough for haylage doing what you always did. The possible good news is that the haylage/winter forage crop will mature later due to very low growing degree days (graph below right). We will have a short burst of warmer weather the beginning of May, then a major cold will come in before spring/summer really begins.



Sincerely,

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Hand
to Better
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