

Opportunities for Global Standardization of Quality Measurement

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Ralph Ward is the founder of Cumberland Valley Analytical Services (CVAS), a laboratory providing forage and feed evaluation services in the U.S. and globally for the past 30 years. With a background in dairy production and nutritional services, he has focused on developing analytical systems for forage quality determination and modeling in dairy rations. He has established over 35 international lab affiliates to promulgate consistency in NIR forage analysis. His current focus is validation of an improved system of NDF digestibility evaluation, improving starch degradation assessment, and development of novel approaches to forage characterization.

Historically dairy production and forage production systems coexisted in a farm enterprise in many dairy regions within and outside the U.S. The trend toward larger herds and location of dairy production systems in regions optimizing cost structures and production return has led to a disconnect between the dairy and forage production enterprises. Huge tonnage of forage is sold and transported significant distances with buyer and seller negotiating value based on an imperfect system of quality assessment. This often leads to conflict when a purchaser's perception of value is not met.

Lack of defined systems of quality assessment, understood and agreed upon by seller and buyer of forage is a significant impediment to efficient price discovery, confidence in trade, and growth in the forage production sector.

Despite a large national and international trade in forages, especially in alfalfa and grass hay, there is limited standardization of approach for assessing forage quality and negotiating value. In the mid-1970's various agricultural interests came together to establish the Relative Feed Value (RFV) concept and propose hay grades for assessing hay quality. In 1984 the National Forage Testing Association was established as a vehicle for standardization across labs of key nutrients of CP, ADF, and NDF. Since that time little has been done to formally advance forage and hay quality definitions. An attempt to improve the RFV concept with the Relative Forage Quality (RFQ) index has met with mixed success as a market valuation tool.

Establishing a system for market valuation of forage that provides the ability to enhance trade allowing for the development of production markets is a feasible task. In a basic approach, it would require key stakeholders to establish a common definition and assign process and quality definitions to an organization that would be an ongoing repository. Key aspects of a quality definition system would include forage definition, growing and origin characteristics, sampling protocols engaged, a common definition of quality assessment, laboratory systems validation, reporting standards, and a defined arbitration system when disputes arise. This enhanced and validated information set would then be transparent to buyer and seller bringing structure to the valuation process.