

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**FORAGE HARVEST MANAGEMENT**

(Ac.)

CODE 511

**DEFINITION**

The timely cutting and removal of forages from the field as hay, green-chop or ensilage.

**PURPOSE**

- Optimize yield and quality of forage at the desired levels
- Promote vigorous plant re-growth
- Maintain stand life
- Manage for the desired species composition
- Use forage plant biomass as a soil nutrient uptake tool
- Control insects, diseases and weeds
- Maintain and/or improve wildlife habitat

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

This practice applies to all land uses where machine harvested forage crops are grown.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

Forage will be harvested at a frequency and height that will maintain a desired healthy plant community. UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE) forage harvest recommendations based on state of maturity, moisture content, length of cut, stubble height and harvest interval should be used to meet the following criteria.

**Stage of Maturity.** Harvest forage at the stage of maturity that provides the desired quality and quantity.

Delay harvest if prolonged or heavy precipitation is forecast that would seriously damage cut forage.

**Moisture Content.** Harvest silage/haylage crops within the optimum moisture range for the type of storage structure(s) being utilized.

UCCE recommendations for optimum moisture content and levels as well as methods and techniques to monitor and/or determine moisture content and levels will be used.

When appropriate, treat direct cut hay crop silage (moisture content > 70%) with chemical preservatives or add dry feed stuffs to avoid fermentation and seepage losses of digestible dry matter.

For optimal dry hay quality, rake hay at 30 to 40 percent moisture and ted or invert swaths when moisture is above 40 percent.

To preserve forage quality and quantity, bale field cured hay at 10 – 20 percent moisture and bale force air dried hay and 15 – 30 percent moisture.

**Length of Cut.** When harvested for ensilage forage will be chopped to a size appropriate for type of storage structure (including high moisture wrapped or tubed bales) that allows adequate packing to produce the anaerobic conditions necessary to ensure the proper ensiling process.

**Contaminants.** Forage shall not contain contaminants that can cause illness or death to the animal being fed or rejection of the offered forage.

When potassium levels are high enough to cause livestock health risk, mix forage with low potassium feed. Evaluate nutrient

management practices to reduce potassium levels.

**Additional Criteria to Improve or Maintain Stand Life, Plant Vigor and Forage Species Mix**

**Stage of Maturity and Harvest Interval.** Cut forage plants at a stage of maturity or harvest interval range that will provide adequate food reserves and/or basal or auxiliary tillers or buds for regrowth and/or reproduction to occur without loss of plant vigor.

Cut reseeding annuals at a stage of maturity and frequency that ensures the production of viable seed or ample carryover of hard seed to maintain desired stand density.

If plants show signs of short-term environmental stress, management will be applied in a manner that encourages the continued health and vigor of the stand.

**Stubble Height.** Cut forage plants at a height that will promote the vigor and health of the desired species. Cutting heights will provide adequate residual leaf area; adequate numbers of terminal, basal or auxiliary tillers or buds; insulation from extreme heat or cold; and/or unsevered stem bases that store food reserves needed for full, vigorous recovery.

Manipulate timing and cutting heights of harvest to ensure germination and establishment of reseeding or seeded annuals.

**Additional Criteria for Use as a Nutrient Uptake Tool**

Employ a harvest regime that utilizes the maximum amount of available or targeted nutrients.

**Additional Criteria to Control Disease, Insect, Weed and Invasive Plant Infestations**

Schedule harvest periods to control disease, insect, and weed infestations. When a pesticide is used to control disease, insects or weeds, adhere to the specified days to harvest period stated on the pesticide label. Evaluate pest management options by planning conservation practice standard Pest Management (595).

Lessen incidence of disease, insect damage, and weed infestation by managing for

desirable plant vigor. Plan and schedule removal of invasive plants.

**Additional Criteria to Improve Wildlife Habitat Values**

If client objectives include providing suitable habitat for desired wildlife specie(s) then appropriate harvest schedule(s), cover patterns, and plant height to provide suitable habitat for the desired specie(s) should be maintained.

Cutting procedures should consider nesting birds when found in forage fields.

**CONSIDERATIONS**

Where applicable coordinate this practice with the current NRCS practice standard for Prescribed Grazing (528).

When nutrients or other soil amendments are applied coordinate this practice with the current NRCS conservation practice standard for Nutrient Management (590) or Waste Utilization (633) as appropriate. An excess or improper balance of nutrients such as nitrogen can produce plant material that causes toxicity in some animals.

To control forage plant diseases, insects, and movement of weeds, clean harvesting equipment after harvest and before storing. Cut forages after dew, rain, or irrigation water on leaves has evaporated.

Care should be taken to produce stored forages of the quality needed for optimum performance of the animal being fed. For instance, immature legume forages can be too low in fiber and lead to metabolic disorders in ruminants and an economic loss to the producer due to lowered animal performance.

Direct cut grass and legume silage can create silage leachate (seepage). Consider the collection, storage, and disposal of this leachate as part of an agricultural waste management system.

In conjunction with harvest options, explore storage and feeding options that will retain acceptable forage quality and minimize digestible dry matter loss. Also consider storage location for large square or round bales/balage with regards to inside vs. outside,

along hedgerows, winter/mud considerations etc.

Where weather conditions make it difficult to harvest the desired quality of forage, use mechanical or chemical conditioners and/or ensile.

In regions where rainfall and/or humidity levels cause unacceptable forage quality losses consider green chopping or ensiling the forage to reduce or eliminate field drying time. Other options are: the use of desiccants, preservatives, conditioners, macerating implements, or barn curing techniques to reduce field-drying time. These techniques can improve the timeliness of harvest and preserve forage quality.

To reduce safety hazards, avoid operating harvesting and hauling equipment on field slopes over 25 percent, particularly on cross slope traffic patterns.

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES CONSIDERATIONS**

NRCS policy is to avoid any effect to cultural resources and protect them in their original location. Determine if installation of this practice or associated practices in the plan could have an effect on cultural resources. The National Historic Preservation Act may require consultation with the California State Historic Preservation Officer.

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cultural.html> is the primary website for cultural resources information. The California Environmental Handbook and the California Environmental Assessment Worksheet also provide guidance on how the NRCS must account for cultural resources. The e-Field Office Technical Guide, Section II contains general information, with Web sites for additional information.

Document any specific considerations for cultural resources in the design docket and the Practice Requirements worksheet.

### **Endangered Species Considerations**

If during the Environmental Assessment NRCS determines that installation of this practice, along with any others proposed, will have an

effect on any federal or state listed Rare, Threatened or Endangered species or their habitat, NRCS will advise the client of the requirements of the Endangered Species Act and recommend alternative conservation treatments that avoid the adverse effects. Further assistance will be provided only if the client selects one of the alternative conservation treatments for installation; or with concurrence of the client, NRCS initiates consultations concerning the listed species with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service and/or California Department of Fish and Game.

### **PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Place the detailed specifications in a site-specific job or design sheet or in the practice narrative in the conservation plan.

These plans and specifications shall be consistent with this standard and shall describe the requirement for applying the practice to achieve its intended purpose.

### **OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE**

Before forage harvest, clear fields of debris that could damage machinery or if ingested by livestock, lead to sickness (for example, hardware disease) or death.

Operate all forage harvesting equipment at the optimum settings and speeds to minimize loss of leaves.

Set shear-plate on forage chopper to the proper theoretical cut for the crop being harvested. Keep knives well sharpened. Do not use re-cutters or screens unless forage moisture levels fall below recommended levels for optimum chopping action.

Regardless of silage/haylage storage method, ensure good compaction and an airtight seal to exclude oxygen and mold formation.

### **REFERENCES:**

- Ball, D. M., C. S. Hoveland, & G. D. Lacefield. Southern Forages. 1991. Potash & Phosphate Institute, Norcross, GA.
- Barnes, R. F., D. A. Miller, & C. J. Nelson. Forages, The Science of Grassland

Agriculture, Fifth Edition. 1995. Iowa State University Press, Ames, IA.

Hanson, A. A., D. K. Barnes, & R. R. Hill, Jr. Alfalfa and Alfalfa Improvement. 1988. American Society of Agronomy, Madison, WI.

Ishler, V. A. Et al. Harvesting and Utilizing Silage. 1991. Penn State University Circular 396. University Park, PA.

Matches, A. G. Anti-Quality Components of Forages. 1973. Crop Science Society of America Special Pub. No. 4, Madison, WI

Pitt, R. E. Silage and Hay Preservation. 1990. Northeast Regional Agricultural Engineering Service. Ithaca, NY.

Serotkin, N., Ed. The Penn State Agronomy Guide, 1995-1996. Pennsylvania State University. 1994. University Park, PA.

Smith, D. Forage Management in the North, Third Edition. 1975. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, Dubuque, IA.

Taylor, N. L. Clover Science and Technology. 1985. American Society of Agronomy, Madison, WI.

Ball, D. et al, Understanding Forage Quality, American Farm Bureau Federation Publication 1-01, Park Ridge, IL.

Robinson, Peter, et al, Interpreting your Forage Test Report, UCCE Agronomy Progress Report # 255, January 1997