2019 U.S. forage statistics

2019 national forage review

Prices

Based on historical USDA data, hay prices hit their peaks in May each year, as old-crop inventories are drawn down and new-crop harvest gets underway. In 2019, other factors magnified that trend, pushing average alfalfa and other hay prices to the highest levels in five years.

As a result, extremely wet spring planting season well behind schedule and delayed hay growing from opening of the growing season. Combined with seven alfalfa wetstock in parts of the Midwest, terms like “scarce” and “shortage” were used to describe forage supplies, with May hay inventories the lowest for that date since 2013.

The need for dairy hay and a somewhat brighter outlook for milk prices helped push hay prices higher, culminating with May U.S. alfalfa hay prices averaging $204 per ton, the highest since August 2014. Although they softened later in the year, alfalfa hay prices averaged $184 in 2019, about $30 per ton higher than 2018.

The overall trend for other hay prices wasn’t quite as dramatic, but the end results were similar. The May 2019 peak of $152 per ton was the highest since May 2014, and the 2019 U.S. average price was also up $10 from 2018 to $139 per ton.

In 2019, to facilitate new margin insurance market analysis, they published market prices for dairy farmers under the Dairy Margin Coverage program, the USDA began reporting monthly statistics for Premium- and Supreme-quality alfalfa in the five largest milk-producing states (California, Idaho, New York, Texas and Wisconsin). The weighted average price for that hay was about $215.

Production

Improved moisture conditions led to increased production across almost all forage categories in 2019. Compared to a year earlier:

- **All dry hay,** Production was estimated at 128.9 million tons, up 4% from 2018. Harvested area was estimated at 52.5 million acres, down 1%, the average yield, at 2.46 tons per acre, was up 0.12 tons from 2018.

- **Alfalfa and alfalfa-mixture dry hay**, Production was estimated at 54.9 million tons, up 7% from a year earlier. Despite the rebound, the total still represented the third-smallest inventory on record.

Exports

Although ongoing tariffs and trade wars dominated the U.S. hay export narrative throughout 2019, final statistics provided a fairly good ending to the story. For alfalfa hay, 2019 U.S. exports set a new record high of 2.667 million metric tons (MT). Monthly sales peaked in October, with sales to China hitting a U.S. record high for any month to any single country.

By year’s end, China had purchased more than 32% of all U.S. alfalfa hay exports for the year. Exports to Japan were far behind, representing 23% of the U.S. total.

Exports of other hay were not as strong, although there was a spike to end the year thanks to price discounting to move inventory and typhoons in Japan and South Korea — the two leading U.S. markets for other hay — which cut domestic supplies. At 1.393 million MT, sales for the year surpassed 2016, but the total was still the second-lowest volume in at least the past 15 years.

Headwinds to the end of the year included lingering uncertainty over the U.S.-China trade agreement and a requirement to switch ships to burn lower-sulfur fuels, which required several days in dry dock.

Weather and drought

Serving as a precursor to the 2019 growing season, the winter of 2018-19 was the wettest in nearly 125 years, shrinking areas under drought conditions significantly. By April, the USDA’s drought monitor showed the smallest U.S. hay and alfalfa areas under dry conditions in a decade. If anything, there was more acreage suffering from flooding rather than drought in the first half of the year.

Somewhat normal summer drought patterns resulted in modest growth of drought areas by August and early September, but dry areas remained small relative to recent years. Western wildfires were much less active in 2019 compared to the previous years, and most of the country escaped the year with minimal impact from tropical storms.

In some areas, the late spring and a cool, wet growing season collided with an early onset of the fall of 2019-20, creating a shorter growing season and smaller harvest windows. Across the Plains and Midwest, rain, snow and early frost hampered or prevented final cuttings.

At year’s end, about 9% of U.S. hay-producing acreage and 6% of alfalfa-producing areas were considered under drought conditions; dry areas all but disappeared in the Southeast but remained prominent in Utah, Colorado and Texas. New drought areas were also emerging in Maine, Oregon and Washington.

*Monthly average prices calculated by USDA are across all hay qualities. Among major hay-producing states, the range of monthly prices can vary by $10 per ton or more.

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Total U.S. forage acres in thousands of acres

- Alfalfa: 35,682
- Other hay: 16,743
- Slage: 6,587
- Greenchop: 4,504
- Combined total: 63,516

Total U.S. tons harvested in thousands of tons

- Silage: 20,132,807
- Other hay: 73,289
- Alfalfa: 5,487
- Greenchop: 29,026
- Combined total: 132,908,071

Legend

- **Source:** Crop Production, 2019 Summary Report USDA, NASS. Statistical data is represented by the source numerical ranking.