

Weekly Market Bulletin

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From Your Commissioner...

Fertilizer Prices, More on Hay

World fertilizer prices have been tumbling from the all-time highs set in 2008, promising some relief for farmers and growers this year. According to IFDC, an international center for soil fertility and agricultural development based in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, the sharp price fluctuations are due to energy prices and supply and demand. Prices were driven up by high natural gas prices (used in making nitrogen fertilizers) and increased demand from economically developing countries, especially in Asia. But those stratospheric prices led to “demand destruction” along with the whole global economic slowdown. Nitrogen and phosphorous prices have come down dramatically in the last month or so, but potash remains high due to shortages and problems around the potash mines in Russia.

Robert Beaudry of Connecticut River Ag LLC in Charlestown confirms these reports. He said larger farm customers have been pre-buying bulk nitrogen and phosphorus at prices 50% lower than 2008 highs. But even at lower prices, with the 2009 price forecast for milk drenched in red ink, many dairy farmers will be taking as hard a look at fertilizer purchases as they did last year when milk prices were strong, and fertilizer was sky-high. Nutrients from farm-produced manure and compost will be valuable.

Ted Scott of Chester sent an email in response to last week’s column on high-priced, low-quality hay. “We made a lot of it this year, about 8,000 bales, mostly all marketed to local horse people. Who would have ever figured that we’d get the prices that we got this year?” However, he rightly points out that rained-on hay is not always dusty or moldy.

Hay can be rained on and still be made without dust, provided that it is dried properly before baling, Scott stresses. “Baling at too high moisture content increases the chances of heating/fire/spoilage.” In general better quality feed results from earlier mowing, even with a risk of a shower, he notes, rather than waiting for a string of perfect drying days and letting the crop go past its prime. He is concerned that some horse hay customers who lack experience in making hay might not understand from my column last week that showered-on hay can be dried properly and fed to horses. “Depending on the rain/drying sequence, it may lose palatability and nutrient value, but hay dried down will not dust or mold,” he notes. “And hay that caught a shower in June is still better than hay that doesn’t get cut until August.”

Since the early summer weather has been so poor the last few years, Scott has shifted to making baleage for the beef cow market. That way he can get started harvesting in May and June, with less stress over the weather forecasts. “Then we’ll have some nice second crop in July and August for the horse customers, rather than more poor quality first crop. It seems to be working, and has promise.”

That’s similar to the route taken by many dairy farmers who long ago grew frustrated with trying to dodge showers to make high quality, first-crop dairy hay in late May and early June. Now most dairy farmers either put up big round plastic-wrapped baleage, like Scott, or chop most of their first crop for haylage. These ensiled—stored, fermented feed—options are put up with higher moisture content, so do not require as much rain-free time to harvest.

Seacoast Eat Local’s winter farmers markets continue to thrive. The first Stratham market drew a big crowd this

past Saturday. People enjoyed looking and visiting—and buying everything from frozen duck, chicken, lamb and veal to boutique potatoes, root vegetables, herbs, frozen blueberries, and honey and maple syrup. Quite a few enthusiastic shoppers said this was their first farmers market.

Lorraine Merrill, Commissioner