Dry summer leads to reduced hay crop

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Fairbanks, Alaska — A hot and dry summer has contributed to reduced hay yields in the Interior and the Matanuska Valley, the biggest hay-growing regions in Alaska.

UAF Cooperative Extension Service agents in Fairbanks, Delta Junction and Palmer report that farmers there are getting yields of about one-third to one-half of their usual crop.

Although many farmers cut a second crop of hay in mid- to late August, Delta agricultural agent Phil Kaspari said the second cutting also looks to be less than half the normal crop.

“It’s going to be a limited yield,” he said.

More rain could improve the yield of hay that has not been cut yet, he said. Fairbanks and Palmer have had a little more rain but reduced yields of the second cutting are still expected.

The main markets for hay are horse and other livestock owners. Because of the shortage, Kaspari said that prices will be higher this year — at possibly $350 to $400 a ton — and the quality of some hay will be lower. Horse owners will need to be open-minded about the hay they get, and might consider mixing barley or oats with the hay, he said. Extension agents can help identify the correct mix.

In an effort to deal with the potential hay shortage, the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Friday authorized emergency haying on Conservation Reserve Program lands near Delta Junction, said Danny Consenstein, executive director for the USDA’s Farm Service Agency in Alaska. This means farmers can apply to harvest up to half of the fields that are part of the program. Participating farmers receive a yearly rental payment to remove environmentally sensitive lands from agricultural development.

Consenstein also notes that the hay inventories were lower than usual this spring because of the cold spring and the need to feed livestock longer. Delta has two of the largest hay-growing operations at 1,000 acres each. Some 10,000 acres of hay is grown in the Tanana Valley and about 7,000 in the Matanuska Valley.

During 2012, Alaska farmers grew 27,000 tons of hay valued at an average $315 a ton, according to the USDA Alaska Agricultural Statistics Service.
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