

## Cutting cereal crops for hay

Cereal crops can be harvested at two stages; early ear emergence or the soft/milky dough stage. Once the ear (head) has emerged, flowering commences, beginning in the middle of the head and spreading upwards and downwards. After flowering, the grain begins to form, and as the grain develops it progresses through a clear liquid phase (commencement of starch deposition) before entering the “milky” stages. As the plant continues to mature, sugars (water soluble carbohydrates) are transferred from the stems to the grain and converted to starch. Harvesting the crop at this point will result in higher dry matter yields but lower quality (lower ME and crude protein and higher NDF). Harvesting at ear emergence will result in a higher quality end product but you will have less of it and it will take longer to wilt (dry) the product down prior to baling. You need to consider the potential of the crop to ‘fill’ before making any decisions on cutting for hay. Look at soil moisture, stage of maturity and appearance of the flag leaf and lower leaves.



Red Wheat (Revenue) crop at the milky dough stage

Regardless of when you decide to cut your crop, you should consider using a mower conditioner. A conditioner will increase the cure rate time reducing the risk or damage by rain. If cut at ear emergence, a flail type conditioner is best as roller types can block easily with the excess sugars present in the stem. Cutting the crop at least 50mm above ground level will exclude some of the stalk in the sample which will improve the fibre (NDF) figures and offer a ‘bed’ where the cut material can sit, allowing air to pass underneath, aiding curing time.

Remember, inspect your crop regularly with your agronomist and discuss ALL your options. There are cost-benefit tools available to assist you in the decision making process. Talk with your consultant and/or agronomist and be prepared!

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