

The Maine Hay Contest

Jaime Garzon. University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Orono, ME. jaime.garzon@maine.edu

THE NEED

Hay is Maine's third most important crop, and most livestock operations rely on it during forage shortages, such as the winter months and summer slump. However, Maine hay producers primarily focus on the quantity produced per area, often overlooking the nutritional quality that affects animal performance later. Recognizing this imbalance, the Maine Hay Contest program seeks to shift the paradigm by encouraging hay producers to evaluate and record their hay's nutritional composition, fostering a spirit of healthy competition that ultimately elevates the overall quality of Maine's hay.

EXTENSION PROGRAMMING

The Maine Hay Contest is funded by different sponsors each year, which allows the program to cover the costs of sampling, shipping, lab analysis, and interpretation of hay samples from each participating farm.

The registration and judging process is as follows:

1. Registration is free online on the webpage that hosts the registering form and contest rules.
2. Once registered, the participant receives a visit from an extension agent to take one hay sample per operation. This is based on a pool of samples from several bales previously selected by the participant.
3. Entries are analyzed in an external lab and judged using NIR testing procedures. The entries are ranked based on Relative Forage Quality (RFQ), which accounts for protein, energy, and fiber digestibility. If necessary, ties in RFQ scores will be broken based on 48-hour digestibility and crude protein concentration.
4. The winners are notified by e-mail or phone. The operations and families with the top three quality hays are recognized and awarded during the Maine Forage Conference, which is usually held in November each year.



Figure 3. First, Second and Third Place in the 2024 Maine Hay Contest.

OUTCOMES

in its inaugural year, 2024, the contest included 12 participating farms from eight Maine counties. The evaluated hay samples showed an average of 14% crude protein and 63% digestibility, receiving 146 RFQ points.

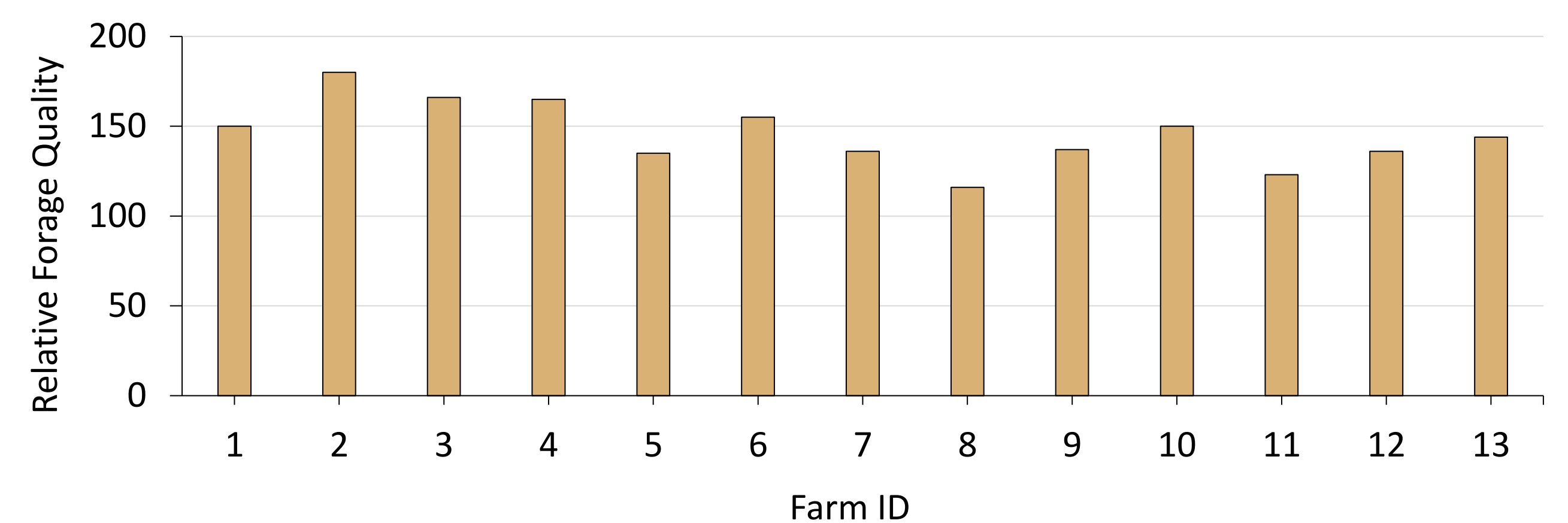


Figure 1. Hay relative forage quality scores at each participating farm in 2024

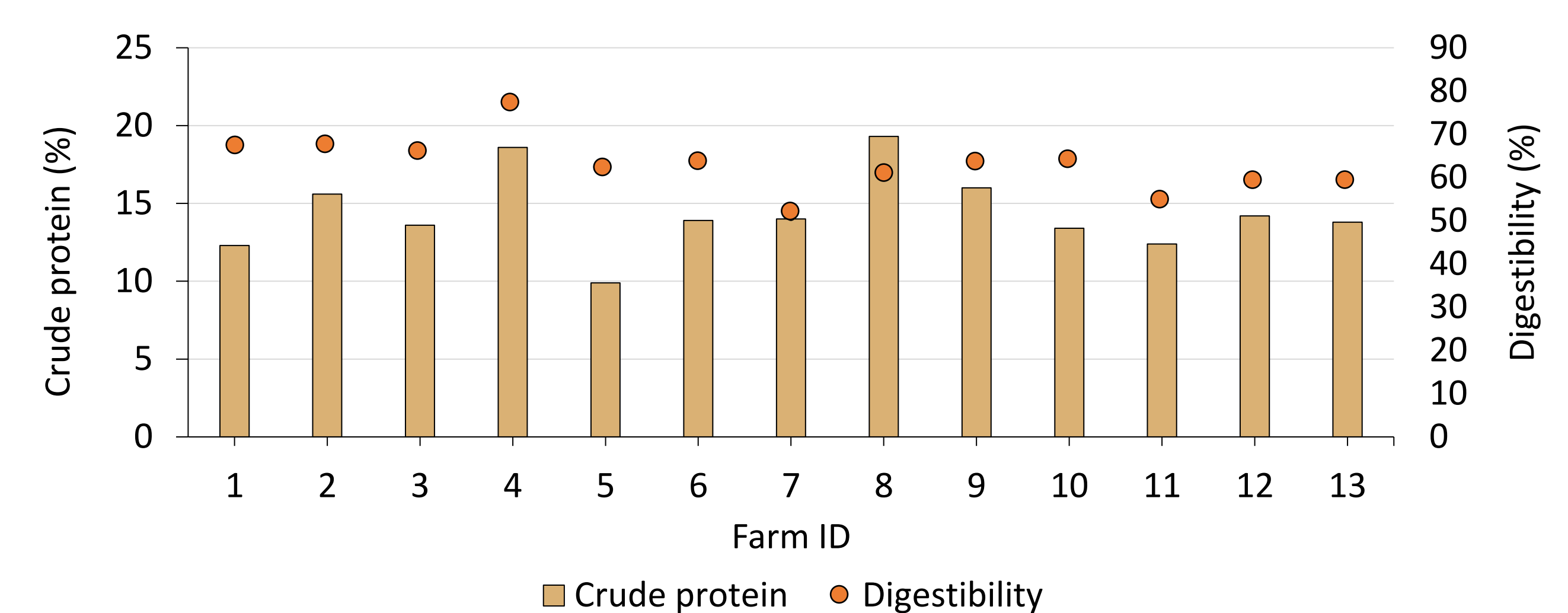


Figure 2. Hay crude protein and 48-h digestibility at each participating farm in 2024

In this first year, 100% of participants expressed satisfaction with the program process; 80% showed interest in improving their harvesting and soil management practices, while 25% aimed to introduce better forage species to their hayfields. Two participants expressed a keen interest in boosting their scores for 2025, and four additional farmers requested to have their hay tested after the competition.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The hay contest is set to occur again in 2025, with expectations for 20 operations to participate. Plans are in place to compare each year's results to evaluate the program's effectiveness over time., while sharing the results in the Maine Forage Conference.

Acknowledgments

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