

## **Blister Beetles, Horses, and Alfalfa Hay**

Blister beetle contamination of alfalfa hay has the possibility of being relatively high this year, due to the large amount of grasshoppers we are seeing. Blister beetles prey on grasshopper eggs and are one of their natural enemies. When beetles are ingested by livestock they can cause irritation of the gastrointestinal tracts.

Three species are encountered in Wyoming, the ash-gray blister beetle, the black blister beetle, and the spotted blister beetle. All types are approximately 3/4 –long, slender, soft-bodied, and fairly long-legged. They are black, gray, or gray with black spots depending on species.

These insects rarely are detrimental to plants; however they can be very harmful to livestock, esp. horses. Blister beetles become contaminated in hay during the haying process. Hay that is left to dry in windrows, a common practice in the intermountain west, is advantageous because live adult beetles will usually disperse before baling. It must be noted though that some blister beetle contamination will occur when beetles are killed during the cutting and baling processes.

Contaminated hay, when ingested, causes digestive tract irritation, due to a chemical compound called cantharidin. Blistering of the digestive tract occurs. Symptoms of poisoning include colic and diarrhea accompanied by blood in the stool, pain while urinating, abnormal urinating patterns, blood in the urine, body tremors, congested mucal membranes, dehydration, depression, shock, and elevated body temperatures. If you suspect blister beetle poisoning, consult your veterinarian.

Inspection of hay bales prior to their use could reduce the chance of poisoning, but it is difficult and time consuming. Blister beetle swarms are rare and thus only small areas in a field are typically infested. The resulting problem may be within an individual hay flake. Blister beetle poisoning is rare in the intermountain west due to small populations, however it never hurts to be alert. If you have any questions regarding blister beetles, please contact the Extension Office at 358-2417.