
Forage Feeding Losses Can Add Up

A livestock producer would not dream of throwing away one-third of the forages that were intended to be fed to the cow herd. Many times, that is exactly what happens when livestock are allowed unlimited access to hay in a feeding situation. Livestock trample, over consume, foul on, and use for bedding 25 to 45 percent of the hay when it is fed with no restrictions or is not processed. Current hay prices are \$80 - \$200 per ton depending on type and quality. Wise managers are going to incorporate as many feeding methods as possible to reduce this waste below 10 percent.

Hay loss and waste can be reduced by feeding hay daily according to diet needs. Daily feeding will force livestock to eat hay they might otherwise refuse, over consume, trample and waste. Cattle will waste less hay when the amount fed is limited to what is needed in a single day. One-fourth more hay is needed when a 4-day supply of hay is fed with free access than when a 1-day supply is fed. Excessive hay consumption will increase costs when large hay packages are fed without restriction. A dry, pregnant cow can eat up to 15 to 20 percent more hay than her needs when allowed free access to a good quality hay. This can amount to almost 500 pounds per cow over a 4-month feeding period for spring calving cows. A 100-cow herd may over consume 24 tons of hay if the cows have free access to hay. This is in addition to the extra needed to replace wasted hay when fed free access.

Large bales fed free choice without a rack or feeder in muddy conditions can result in forage losses exceeding 45%. Feeding losses for hay fed daily in bunks can be kept in the 3 -14 percent range. Well designed feeders (with solid bottom panels) will have losses in the 3-10 percent range. Round bales are most efficiently fed in cone feeders, which have losses significantly lower than other ring or cradle. Hay racks or bale feeders with solid barriers at the bottom prevent livestock from pulling hay out to be stepped on. Some producers have fed forages on an up-slope with the hay next to an electric fence. Their observation is that, when the hay is spread in a long line so that all cows have access next to the electric fence, forage losses due to trampling are minimal.

Allowing cattle free access to forages that have a thicker stalk or stem results in greater forages losses during feeding compared to thin stemmed forages like hays. Some producers have said grinding forages will increase forage quality. This is not true. In fact there is no change in quality. Grinding dry hay on windy days can reduce both quality and quantity. In some grinding situations, quality may decrease, especially if the hay is ground on a windy day.

Grinding or processing hay in a bale processor is a method to increase consumption of low to medium quality forages. Grinding different forages together will allow to combine forages of differing quality for best use in a cow feeding diet and is adaptable to low waste bunk feeding. It also allows a way to blend and transition forages that contain nitrate levels that are at the potentially toxic level.

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