

Winter Time Feeding

Hay feeding time has started and feeding big round bales sure makes the job easier. Large bale feeding systems are designed to minimize labor but not waste. Most producers feed hay in some kind of feeder but did you know the type of feeder can affect how much hay is wasted?

Feeding hay in a rack or a round bale feeder limits the opportunity animals have to trample or soil hay, and reduces waste substantially. Least feeding losses occur where hay is fed with a rack or bale feeder that forces the animal to turn its head when backing away from the feeder. When animals can back straight out of a feeder, they can pull out large chunks of hay that drop on the ground and are lost as feed. Research at the University of Nebraska and Michigan State University has shown feed waste of 3.3%, 5.9%, 9%, 11.1%, and 14.2% for cone, ring feeder with skirt, racks, trailer and cradle feeders. Long feeders are less effective than round or square feeders because boss animals will push others back by walking down the long feeder, interrupting their feeding and reducing their intake. The Noble Foundation has an easy to use spreadsheet to help you calculate hay wastage: <http://www.noble.org/ag/tools/livestock/hay-ring/> Cone feeders are more expensive but when you figure the amount and value of the hay that is saved, they may be worth the extra cost especially if you have feeders with no skirts on them.

Hay loss and waste can also be reduced by managing how often we feed. Daily feeding will force cattle to eat hay they might otherwise refuse, over-consume, trample and waste. Cattle waste less hay when the amount fed is limited to what is needed each day. One fourth more hay is needed when a four-day supply is fed with free access. If hay is fed free choice, cows will over consume.

While some losses will always occur, keeping losses to a minimum can reduce feed costs, resulting in more efficient use of forages and increasing the profitability of the cow herd enterprise.

North Dakota State University has studied the potential for digestive problems in cattle that consume net wrap, plastic twine, biodegradable twine and sisal twine. Their research shows that after 14 days net wrap, biodegradable twine are not broken down in the rumen. 70% of sisal twine does get broken down. A little twine or net wrap in the rumen may not be damaging but as the cow accumulates it over time problems could arise. Might pay to take a little more time and remove all the net wrap or twine.

Finally, do you know the nutrient content of your hay or forages? Testing forages lets you determine their best and most economical use. It helps you to allocate higher quality forage to high producing livestock and poorer quality forages to animals at lower levels of production. For a list of testing labs contact me. UNL Extension also has a NebGuide on Sampling Feeds for Analyses.

Questions to consider:

How much hay is wasted by my cows and what is it costing me?

Do my hay feeders have a solid ring or skirt on them?

Is this the year to replace some of my old feeders with a better feeder? Cone feeder?

What is the nutrient quality of my hay/forages?

For more beef information, check out the UNL Extension beef web site-- beef.unl.edu. If you have any questions or if I can be of help, please email me or give me a call.

