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VALUING CORN STALK BALES

With dry conditions still plaguing much of the state, baling corn residue following harvest might be an optional roughage source if hay supply is getting tight. What value should be put on harvesting corn residue?

Figuring out the true value of corn stalk bales can be a bit tricky, but breaking down the costs can help it make sense. First, look at the value of nutrients removed from the field that will need to be replaced by fertilizer. Stalks this fall will contain between \$3-5 worth of nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, and sulfur per ton.

Stalks also provide organic matter and help reduce erosion. We need to account for the loss of these benefits as well. Nebraska research shows that dryland corn yield declines about 2 bushels for each ton of residue removed. Irrigation costs increase similarly to maintain yields, accounting for an additional \$10-12 per ton.

Baling stalks is harder on equipment than putting up grass or alfalfa hay. This additional labor and equipment cost comes in at around \$20-25 per ton. Adding everything up, we accumulate \$33 to \$45 in cost per ton of residue removed.

With costs calculated, we have to figure out what a bale is worth. From a nutritional standpoint, corn stalk bales don't come out much better than straw. Even if being selective with what we harvest, we can only count on around 5% crude protein and up to 55% TDN. With these values, combining stalks with distillers grain in a diet may be the most efficient use. Comparing a distillers grain and stalk ration with a mixed grass hay diet, we can put a value on corn stalk bales up to \$80 per ton.

So, is corn stalk harvest worth it? This year with fertilizer prices down, and hay up, corn stalk bales may be a reasonable option to explore.

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