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STORING AND FEEDING HAY LOSSES

Current hay prices have given every livestock owner pause when considering the impact on this winter's feed bill. With such a high value, storing and feeding out hay with as little loss as possible is going to be important. Do you have a game plain to minimize hay storage and feed loss this year?

While only Mother Nature knows what lay in store for the winter months ahead, our current dry weather can very well turn into snow and mud fast. If this winter does take a turn for the worse, are you prepared? The principles of bale storage are fairly straight forward and easy implement while dry weather holds.

First, mitigate the impact of moisture. Move bales away from areas where snow will drift making access difficult. Tree lines, low areas, and fence rows are all natural snow catches, and while convenient, are poor locations for winter bale storage. Additionally, areas where snow collects often become muddy during the spring thaw. While we may be able to plow through drifts and get access while the ground is frozen, bales stored across plowed fields or along minimum maintenance roads may be unusable later on due to mud.

Next, organize your hay. Hopefully by now, you have taken some forage tests and have a good idea of the nutrient value of the bales on hand. Higher quality hay may be needed later in the winter or early spring for late gestation cows or pairs at peak lactation. Right now lower quality forage will suffice for spring-calving cows. We can position bales accordingly to make access easier and minimize any question about which hay is which when it comes time to up the quality.

Hay that might be higher in nitrates should be noted as well. Nitrate poisoning can occur just as easily in the winter while feeding hay as from grazed forages. Remember nitrates aren't reduced in hay after harvest. Because of this, feeding high nitrate hay during a storm when animals are hungry and no other feed is available can easily lead to an overdose and critical cases of nitrate poisoning. Know where these bales are feed them out in a manner and time that will mitigate the nitrate risk.

With storage taken care of, how we feed hay to our animals can be just as important in reducing waste.

There are many ways to feed hay, with each method impacting waste differently. First let's look at amount and frequency of feeding. If hay is fed free choice or unrestricted, studies have shown cattle wasting up to 45% of what is provided. Limit feeding hay so only what is required is fed, will significantly reduce waste right away. One study looking at frequency of feeding showed cattle fed daily needed 25% less hay than those feed every 4 days to maintain similar body condition. That's a huge amount. While labor and equipment cost slightly increased the amount of hay saved can more than make up for the increased costs when prices are high like they currently are.

When it comes to how animals physically get to the hay, one common method of feeding is to feed hay directly onto the ground. This can be done by unrolling bales or distributing ground hay or loose hay across a field or pasture. As we learned already, limiting the amount fed to enough for only 1-2 days will help reduce waste right away. Still, feeding on the ground is most likely to result in higher waste as animals trample or soil hay as they feed.

Limiting access to the hay with physical barriers prevents this from occurring, decreasing hay loss. Bale rings, racks, fences, feed bunks, or another form of limited access can all decrease waste. The most effective physical barriers have solid side bottoms. This prevents the hay being pulled out of the feeder and onto the ground. While these methods are

effective, they require the purchase of additional equipment and increase labor when feeding. For large herds or changing feeding location this can add significant time and money.

Another option to consider is bale grazing. In this practice, bales are spread out across a field or pasture and temporary fence is used to confine animal access to one bale at a time. When it's time for more hay, the producer moves a fence instead of moving a bale. Because hay is not spread out like ground feeding or contained with a physical feeder, this method of feeding will typically result in the most waste. Additionally, while time to move fence during feeding may be minimal, setting out the bales initially and perimeter fence make this a font-heavy labor investment.

One final point to consider is what we actually consider as waste. Our conversation so far has assumed that any hay not going into an animal's stomach is a loss or waste. However, in some cases, the addition of organic matter in trampled hay as well as concentrated manure and urine from feeding could be seen as a soil amendment, not a loss. With high hay prices, the cost of amending soil in this fashion needs to be taken into consideration, but feeding loss can sometimes be in the eye of the beholder.

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