

May 24, 2017

FEED HAY, NOT DIRT

Like it or not, all hay has some dirt in it. How much dirt can vary greatly, though. And the best way to estimate how much dirt your hay contains is by looking at the percent ash from a forage test report.

Most forage plants naturally contain about six percent ash. If your forage test indicates you have much more than that, the extra ash is most likely dirt. Since dirt doesn't have much nutritional value, minimizing dirt contamination will be better for your animals.

First, cut hay before it lodges. Downed stems naturally pick up more dirt than upright plants. And when you cut, be careful not to cut too short. A three-inch stubble is about right to minimize dirt while harvesting most of your potential yield. Be especially careful if you cut with a disk mower. They can easily cut extremely low, even to ground level, without plugging. And disk mowers with angled knives tend to vacuum up more dirt than flat knives.

It also helps to spread hay in a wide swath after cutting. Tight, heavy windrows tend to sink to the ground while wide swaths may stay on top of the stubble. This also makes it easier to rake without picking up dirt because the tines won't need to touch the ground if hay is on top of the stubble. Tines on wheel rakes need to touch the ground in order to turn so they pick up more dirt than rotary or bar rakes.

Finally, bales stored on the ground will pick up soil, especially if it is muddy when the bales are moved. Consider storing bales under cover or on crushed rock to reduce contamination.

You may not see it, but hay can contain a lot of dirt. Careful equipment operation and bale storage can help you keep it clean.

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