

HAYLAGE: LESS IS MORE

DISCOVERING WHY HAYLAGE IS AN ALTERNATIVE TO HAY

Rain, rain go away! Is it around this time that you're uttering this phrase while looking at your rained-on forage? It often spoils the drying time that it would take for a complete curing and dry. As an alternative to baled hay, many farmers have gone to haylage because it provides a huge advantage if perfect drying days do not exist. Here are a few ways haylage can serve well for your harvesting operations.

LESS DRYING TIME

In its essence, haylage is baled forage with a higher moisture content than dry hay. Also known as round bale silage since it's commonly sealed in plastic wrap, haylage is preserved more effectively despite less-desired weather conditions. It also shortens the time needed for more curing.

"Ensiling grasses and legumes as haylage requires 40 to 60 percent moisture," said J.W. Schroeder, an extension dairy specialist at North Dakota State University. "Reductions in moisture content necessary for production of haylage are accomplished by conditioning (mowing, windrowing and drying for four to 24 hours) and depends on forage moisture and conditions."

LESS HARVEST LOSSES

Just as with baled hay, proper storage techniques are necessary to prevent excessive losses before feeding, said Warren Rusche, South Dakota State University Extension Cow/Calf Specialist.

"In the case of haylage, keeping oxygen out of the bag, bunker or silo is critical to keeping dry matter losses to a minimum. It's very important to sufficiently pack the pile to eliminate air pockets and to increase the density of the bunker," he added. "Bunker silos or piles need to be covered to prevent a layer of spoiled feedstuffs. Also, bags and bunker covers alike need to be checked during the storage period to make sure that there aren't any holes in the plastic to let in air."

LESS HELP

More farm owners and managers are becoming more aware of equipment such as tube-filling machines and specialized balers that help create high moisture bales, or baleage.

"In this system, the bale is entirely covered with a plastic wrap

to exclude oxygen. This method eliminates the need for a separate chopper and hauling system, while still allowing a producer to harvest at higher moisture levels," Rusche said.

Specialty equipment like flex tubes of polyethylene and tube filling machines are beneficial in decreasing to farm labor, costs and time required bagging individual bales.

"There is also a multi-bale system that uses the same stretch film as individually wrapped bales," said Steve Clarke of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. "It is estimated that multi-bale systems use up to 40 percent less plastic over individual wrapping and will therefore lower cost. There are now multi-bale systems that can be used to store big square bale haylage as well as round bale haylage."

EVERY ROSE HAS ITS THORN

Although there are advantages in haylage versus hay, there are some setbacks if choosing that particular method. For instance, plastic wrap serves as a great protector of the elements, but it's an easy target for neighboring pests.

"Rodents can chew through the plastic wrap or bag, which will greatly increase storage losses. Spray the perimeter of the stack to kill weeds that harbor rodents and insects," said Michelle Shooter of the North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension. "Do not cover the bales with an extra layer of plastic because it makes an ideal nesting site for rodents."

Also, plastic wrapping could be a headache if not thought through thoroughly. If farm owners and managers haven't outsourced such work and/or just getting started with haylage, they might have to make the big purchases chopping, hauling and storage equipment initially. Plus, there's the wrap itself.

"The plastic wrapping does present some challenges. First, these bales need to be handled carefully to avoid creating holes and allowing air to contact the forage," Rusche said. "Second, there would be a significant amount of plastic to be disposed of with each bale. A producer should consider how that waste would be disposed before adopting this system."