

# Conditioner management boosts haylage quality

NEW HOLLAND — Every dollar off the cost of producing a hundred pounds of milk is the same as getting an extra dollar in the milk check. Cutting production cost to the bone is critical now that milk prices are under pressure. Haylage and high moisture ground ear corn are helping many to lower feed costs.

Forage management is the place most dairymen can find their best chances of an earnings boost. Especially haylage. Saving more of what is grown, storing it and feeding it to get the largest production at lowest cost is the aim everywhere. But there's still a lot of room for improvement, according to Joe Weicksel of Sperry New Holland. Too many dairymen aren't getting nearly full value from their crop, he says.

Cutting the crop when it's tender and very digestible is the first step. Conditioner management is especially important. It's really a

key item in converting legumes and grass into milk, says Weicksel, who is product manager for hay tools at Sperry New Holland.

For haylage, it's important to use enough roll pressure to have the plant stems bruised every few inches but not enough to break the leaves loose from the plant stems. The leaves should be fastened on the stem when the plant comes out of the conditioner. Losses will be excessive, otherwise. Drying will be more uniform when the plant is neither over or under-conditioned. This is important for fermentation in the silo.

Flail-type conditioners that work in grass are usually too aggressive for alfalfa and clover, says Weicksel, because of the larger leaf loss they cause. Rubber faced roll-type conditioners were designed for alfalfa and are still the most effective for the crop, he notes.

The moisture considerations

seem to be more important than thought a few years ago. The natural moisture inside the plant seems to support a more desirable fermentation than water added externally if the crop gets too dry in the windrow. Waiting for the dew to remoisten the leaves in the evening when haylage has gotten too dry isn't fully satisfactory.

When hay has gotten too dry in the windrow for good haylage it is probably best to bale it for hay, says Weicksel.

The most favored moisture content ranges are 45 to 65% (moisture). When the crop dries under 45% moisture (55% drymatter) baling for hay is probably advisable instead of chopping for the silo.

Moisture contents can be a bit higher if you store haylage in a conventional silo. And perhaps a bit lower if you use sealed, or oxygen-limiting silos. Large diameter silos and wide, deep bunkers may benefit from slightly wetter material because heat of the fermentation process has to be conducted to the outside before the silage can cool down.

Managing the cutting and conditioning for chopping in a narrow moisture range isn't a problem if you adjust the windrow shields for varying width swaths or windrows. By depositing the crop in a wide swath at the start, you speed



Conditioner management is a key to making quality haylage.

up the wilting process so you can start chopping sooner. Then if you narrow the windrows as mowing progresses you will slow the wilting so those windrows won't be too dry before you can get to them with the harvester. You put more crop into the silo at a more uniform moisture content.

Rake management deserves careful thought, too according to Weicksel. Those first passes around the field that were deposited in a wide swath for quicker wilting will need raking

before chopping to narrow them enough for the windrow pickup of the forage harvester. But raking should be minimized to reduce leaf loss.

Raking within about a day and a half after a rain is advised if rain stalls your haylage operation. Rain on scarcely wilted windrows doesn't damage the crop as much as rain on nearly dried crop. But windrows should be turned to prevent the start of mold growth on the bottom of the windrow.

## IH conditioners

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