

# Good Haylage Results from Proper Conditioning

NEW HOLLAND — Conditioning is especially important for good haylage results, says Joe Weicksel of New Holland Inc. When it's excessive you increase field losses. Underconditioning is undesirable because it will increase the time the crop is at risk to rain damage unless you chop it at higher than desirable moisture contents.

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.

Farmers are making much better haylage now than just a few years ago, says Weicksel, who is product manager for hay tools at New Holland. It's a matter of having better information all the way from growing the crop to feeding it, he adds. This is largely due to the practical research of

dairy scientists, agronomists and engineers who've been working on the problem for over 20 years.

But farmers' cut-and-try experience has been important. Farmers, for example, have figured out how to use tedders designed for grass crops in legumes without destroying the leaves. Plant moisture content at the time of tedding is the key. You have to do it before the leaves are dry enough to break off.

Agronomists have figured out

how to improve yields and keep stands productive longer. Through forage testing we've learned to cut alfalfa for the bud stage before flowers appear to get the best protein and feed quality.

Conditioning is an important part of the haylage process. 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.

Generally, 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 cools down to ambient temperature.

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 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.

Rake management also deserves careful thought, 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, Weicksel points out. But windrows should be turned to prevent the start of mold growth on the bottom of the windrow.

The leaves should be fastened on the stem when the plant goes through 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.

The moisture content seems to be more important than we thought a few years ago. The natural moisture inside the plant seems to support a more desirable fermentation than water you might add 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 the hay has gotten too dry in the windrow for good haylage it is probably better to bale it for hay, says Weicksel.

The most favored moisture content ranges are 45 to 65 percent. When the crop dries under 45 percent moisture, or exceeds 55 percent dry matter, baling for hay is probably advisable instead of chopping for the silo.

When the crop is that dry, it won't require many more hours to reach baling moisture content. If preservatives are used, it can be baled sooner.

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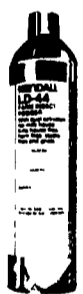
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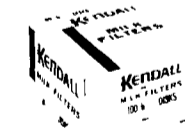
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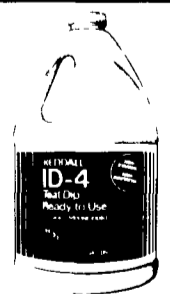
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