Beef Briefs

by
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KEYS TO MAKING AND FEEDING QUALITY HAY FOR BEEF COWS

For most of the productive year, an average-sized beef cow can meet most of her nutritional needs with some good quality hay. This is particularly true if there is a small percentage of legume mixed with grass in the hay.

Most producers are aware of the proper stage of these grasses and legumes for harvesting. The key component is that, if the plant is mature, there is a reduction in feed value.

We often hear about tons of hay produced per acre. If we are selling the hay by the ton, this would be appropriate. If we are feeding beef cows, we should be more concerned about the TDN and protein production per acre, and these factors can be improved by proper harvest.

Mother Nature will often dictate when we will harvest hay in Pennsylvania, but give some thought to harvesting a little early this year to capture more feed value instead of waiting for tonnage.

For example, the energy value of alfalfa hay will be reduced by almost 20 percent when cutting at full bloom instead of at early bloom. Similar differences in energy value also exist for grass hays cut at a later maturity.

Many of the hay-treatment products are effective. Propionic acid treatment of hay at moisture levels of 20-30 percent will effectively eliminate molds and reduce dry matter losses by a half.

Bale wrapping is another alternative for some producers. A farmer recently told me it costs him about $3.50 per bale to wrap them, but he was able to get a cutting in late October that would not have been possible from a conventional harvest since he was able to bale within hours after cutting. In addition to reducing harvesting losses, the bale wrap also provides a storage advantage to maintain the hay quality.

We can make some of the highest-quality hay possible, but in conventional big bales stored outside, we can expect to throw away one of every three of the bales from storage losses. A recent summary of several hay storage trials indicated there will be a 29 percent greater feed value in bales stored inside than those stored outside with no cover, and there will be 27 percent more hay in those stored outside with a plastic cover and elevated off the ground.

It does not take much of an economist to determine some kind of cover will be cost-effective for big bales of hay. A big bale of hay is in the form of a cylinder, and, for a bale with a 3-foot diameter, the outside 6 inches of the bale represents about 30 percent of the volume of the bale.

The damage from weather does not have to penetrate very far into the bale to represent a large loss in hay. Elevation off the ground will generally reduce storage losses by about 10 percent. Most water damage to big bales stored outside on the ground is on the underside of the bale, not on the top. Rock, wooden pallets, and small trees can all be used to elevate the bales. Store the bales at the top of the hill on a well drained soil.

Feeding losses with hay can be considerable. For example, it has been determined that unrolling big bales in the pasture with no feeder will result in a loss of 50 percent of the bale. While this practice is often used for soil conservation, it is a very wasteful way to feed hay.

A small ring-type feeder is a wise investment for feeding hay. Losses will be about 30 percent greater in feeding big bales without using some type of feeder. In years of short hay supply, this becomes an essential practice.

The beef producer can effectively eliminate supplemental feeding of beef cows if there is high-quality hay available. Proper harvest timing, some unconventional harvesting methods, proper storage, and proper feeding of the hay can help increase quality and reduce losses.

Fly Control

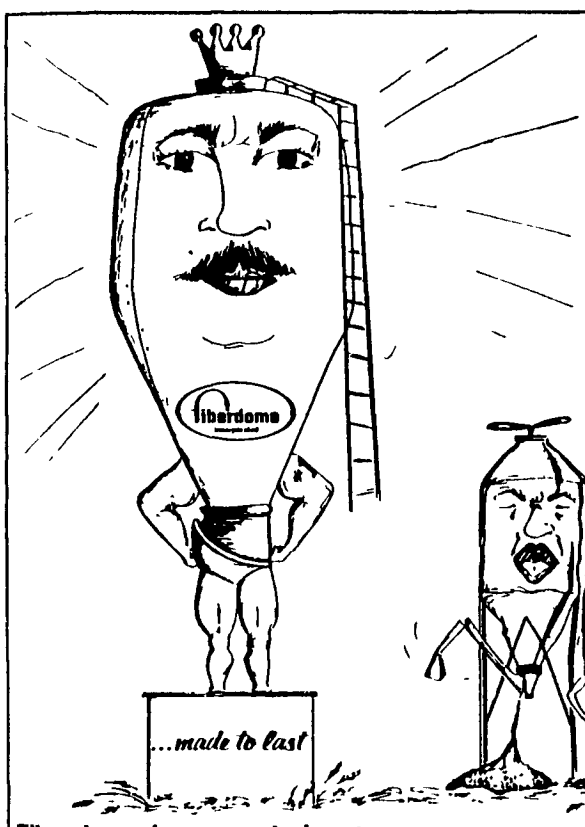
I have encountered numerous questions recently about fly control in beef cows.

To summarize, the most effective control may still be the insecticide-impregnated ear tags. There is some indication horn flies have built up some resistance to the pyrethrin class of chemicals, so you may wish to change to another chemical class such as diazinon or primiphos-methyl tags.

If you have not used tags or a pyrethrin spray on your farm, there is a good chance you can still do a good job with this product. To determine which class of chemical is in any given tag, simply look at the label on the box. Follow the instructions for their use very closely.

I was in Missouri some years ago when the tags were first being tested, and the original studies showed there was no real advantage to tagging the calf as long as the cows were correctly tagged. But you should use your own judgement based on conditions at your farm on how many tags to use in each cow and whether to put tags in the calves. Some of the tags can last up to five months, so you can determine the economics for yourself of spraying cows weekly or tagging them.

Oral larvicides can be used for fly control. By this method, the insecticide is added to the mineral or protein available to the cows. The compound is such that it is not digested by the cow, but remains in the manure and kills the fly larvae when the eggs are deposited in it. It is only effective against the larvae, so if there is another source of flies, such as other cows across the fence from yours, the flies will not be controlled.



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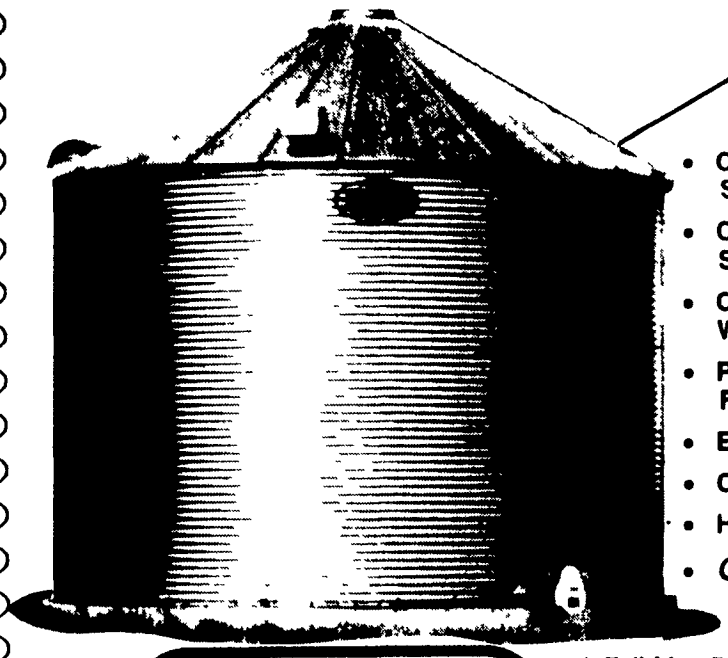

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