

Farmers Risk Silo Fires From Dry Corn Plants

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tural engineering Dennis Murphy. "If there's not enough moisture to dissipate that heat, spontaneous combustion can result."

"The corn plants we've sampled

are about five percentage units drier than we'd expect at this stage of maturity," said Greg Roth, associate professor of agronomy. "If you usually estimate corn moisture by kernel development, the corn will be drier than you think."

Corn with a moisture content below 50 to 55 percent is especially likely to cause silo fires. "Such a crop probably should not be considered for silage," Roth said.

"Adding water to corn silage to make it less dry is helpful, but it often is difficult to add as much as is necessary."

In two recent cases, fires began after farmers put corn silage on top of haylage. "When you mix two different materials in a silo, it's hard to get uniform packing," said Murphy. "That creates air pockets where the haylage and corn silage meet, which can make spontaneous combustion more likely."

Silo fires usually start in the top 10 feet of ensiled material. "If you suspect for any reason that the material in your silo is getting too hot, check it a couple of times each

day," Murphy warns. "Look for small puffs of smoke and smell for burning odors."

To help prevent silo fires, Murphy offers the following advice:

- Chop silage with a moisture content of 50 to 65 percent. Test the moisture of the material being ensiled.

- Chop silage fine — ideally to about a quarter-inch, but not over half an inch to an inch. If the chopped forage is over an inch and a half in length, sharpen the knives in your chopper and reset the shear bar clearance.

- Mow and condition only what can be put up in a single day.

- Use a good center fill or properly adjusted mechanical silage distributor and follow manufacturer's directions.

- To assure good packing, fill the silo rapidly at a rate of at least two feet per hour.

More information about preventing and putting out silo fires is available in "Extinguishing Silo Fires," NRAES-18, available for review at Penn State Cooperative Extension county offices or for \$4 from the Publications Distribution Center, The Pennsylvania State University, 112 Agricultural Administration Building, University Park, PA 16802-2602.

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