Feeding Cattle Hay Can Really Be A Waste

COLUMBUS, Ohio — If not managed properly, more than 60 percent of the hay fed to cattle could go to waste, said Steve Boyles, Ohio State University Extension beef specialist.

"Because of a cow's behavior, it may eat a certain amount of hay then lay on the rest, or stand on some hay while it's eating and then won't eat the soiled hay," Boyles said, "Using a bale feeder or some other method to restrict cattle's access to hay wouldn't allow them to stomp as much into the ground and could greatly reduce hay wastage."

Hay is the most widely grown mechanically harvested crop in the United States, with more than 150 million tons of hay harvested from 60 million acres of forage crops each year. Annual production is valued at more than $12 billion. But it's estimated that the total value of hay storage and feeding losses exceeds $3 billion annually. On some farms, losses can account for more than 10 percent of the cost of livestock production Boyles said.

"Some hay losses during feeding can be expected with any feeding system, but the amount of loss varies with methods of feeding," he said. "In research trials, feeding losses have ranged from less than 2 percent when great care is taken to more than 60 percent when no attempts were made to reduce loss."

The biggest waste during feeding occurs when producers allow livestock to have unlimited access to hay. Wastage can be 40 percent or more when cattle are allowed free access to large round bales without feed racks, Boyles said. When rings or feeders are used to restrict access to large bales, average hay wastage is lowered significantly to 9 percent. Only 7 percent of hay is lost when smaller square bales are fed in a rack.

Wastage is greater with low quality hay than with high quality hay for all feeding systems.

Limiting the amount of hay fed to a one-day supply also reduces losses. Boyles said. Cattle with free access waste 11 percent of hay when given a one-day supply of 20 pounds, 25 percent when given a two-day supply of 40 pounds, and 31 percent when given a four-day supply of 80 pounds.

"Intermittent feeding may be necessary to reduce labor, and time is money, so some producers may have to balance out how often they feed with how much hay they're willing to waste," he said. "If substantial quantities of hay must be put out at one time, putting a barrier between the hay and the cattle will reduce waste."

The barrier could be an electric wire, feeding racks or rings, panels, wagons, or gates. Feeding racks and rings are available in a variety of shapes and sizes, and blueprints of homemade bale protectors are available through Ohio State University Extension, Boyles said.

Altering hay bales before feeding, such as unrolling a bale to enable livestock to line up and eat like at a feed bunk, can reduce waste. But unrolling a bale and allowing free access still results in an average hay loss of 23 percent.

When feeding hay in a pasture at various locations, cattle waste less if they have solid footing. Dry, well-drained or frozen sites should be chosen when feeding hay outside, he said. More hay is trampled and uneaten when feeding at wet or muddy locations.

Feeding hay in only one area allows producers to select convenient feeding locations that are easily accessible and minimize the areas where sod is

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