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Winter Hay Considerations

The type of hay feeder used can affect hay waste.

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Hay feeding time has started, and feeding big round bales sure makes the job easier. Large bale feeding systems are designed to minimize labor but not waste. Most producers feed hay in some kind of feeder, but did you know the type of feeder can affect how much hay is wasted?

Feeding hay in a rack or a round bale feeder limits the opportunity animals have to trample or soil hay and reduces waste substantially. Minimal feeding losses occur where hay is fed with a rack or bale feeder that forces the animal to turn its head when backing away from the feeder. When animals can back straight out of a feeder, they can pull

out large chunks of hay that drop on the ground and are lost as feed.

Research at the University of Nebraska and Michigan State University has shown feed waste with the following:

- Cones: 3.3%
- Ring feeders with a skirt: 5.9%
- Racks: 9%
- Trailers: 11.1%
- Cradle feeders: 14.2%

Cone feeders are more expensive, but when you figure the amount and value of the hay that is saved, cone feeders may be worth the extra cost — especially if your feeders have no skirts.

Hay loss and waste can also be reduced by how often you feed. Daily feeding will force cattle to eat hay they might otherwise refuse, overconsume, trample and waste. Cattle waste less hay when the amount fed is limited to what is needed each day. Twenty-five percent more hay is needed when a four-day supply is fed with free access. Cows will overconsume if hay is fed free choice.

Long feeders are less effective than round or square feeders because boss animals will push others back by walking down the long feeder, interrupting other cows' feeding and reducing their intake.

While some losses will always occur, keeping losses to a minimum can reduce feed costs, resulting in more efficient use of forages and increasing the profitability of the cow herd enterprise. The Noble Foundation has an easy-to-use spreadsheet to help you calculate hay wastage, noble.org/ag/tools/livestock/hay-ring/.

Hay wrap, digestible or harmful?

North Dakota State University has studied the potential for digestive problems in cattle that consume net wrap, plastic twine, biodegradable twine and sisal twine. This research shows that after 14 days net wrap and biodegradable twine are not broken down in the rumen. Seventy percent of sisal twine breaks down in the rumen. A little twine or net wrap in the rumen may not be damaging, but as the cow accumulates it over time, problems could arise. It might pay to take a little more time to remove all the net wrap or twine.

Test your hay for nutrients

Finally, do you know the nutrient content of your hay or forages? Testing forages lets you determine their best and most economical use in a ration. Forage testing helps you to allocate higher quality forage to high producing livestock (i.e. a growing calf) and poorer quality forages to animals at lower levels of nutritional needs (i.e. a dry cow). **HW**