

THE FORAGER

Agronomics with livestock in mind!

Keeping Stored Forages at High Quality...

The harvest season is (almost) over and the forages are now in storage to be fed in the months ahead. However, only part of the job in delivering high quality forage to dairy animals is done. Producers need to consider if proper management practices are in place to keep the ensiled or baled forages in a high quality condition? They also need to ask if they will have as much high quality forage when next spring and summer roll around as their planning suggests (and before the next crop is ready)? It is important to *minimize* forage losses and spoilage in stored forage, as well as to maintain forage quality from field to the feed bunk. Remember, most forage dry matter losses occur during storage and feed out. In fact, in a 1995 research study, Roth and Undersander found that feed out losses can represent up to 30% of the total dry matter loss in the forage ensiling and management processes. So, assuming a producer has harvested the silage at the correct moisture content... has packed the bunker or filled the silo bag at the appropriate density per cubic foot (to keep air out for proper fermentation)... has sealed the storage unit correctly... what else needs to be done to avoid losses?

Here is a list of items to check, which can help to ensure quality forage is maintained:

- Make sure plastic covers on bunkers or the silo bags are protected from punctures by rodents, livestock, dogs, cats, and wild animals.
- Conduct weekly inspections and repair holes in the plastic to exclude air and water.
- Before winter sets in, mow and clean up around the bunker silo and bags to discourage rodents.
- When feeding out, only the amount of silage that will be fed in a short period (< 3 days) should be uncovered at one time. Slow feed out rates allow more time for losses due to the growth of yeasts, molds, and aerobic bacteria.
- Never scoop silage from the bottom – up, as this allows more air to enter the silage mass, resulting in spoilage.
- Maintaining a smooth, firm face and cleaning up loose silage from the bunker floor or around the bag on feed out will help minimize aerobic losses.
- Consider using a facer to maintain a smooth face (see photo in next column).

(continued in next column)



In a 2001 Wisconsin field study, Sutter and Shaver found no reduction in effective fiber using facers when compared to either hand removal or unloaded-bucket removal. Remember, if spoiled silage does occur, do not try to stretch silage inventories by feeding it to cattle. Feeding spoiled silage, even at 5% of the total DM, will reduce intake. Spoiled silage can partially or totally destroy the forage mat in the rumen. Also, feeding spoiled silage to heifers and dry cows has a negative effect on fertility and reproductive performance.

Right now is a good time to review forage storage management practices with your producers, as we begin to prepare for the months ahead. Then, discuss those [practices] with the producer and their staff, so that everyone on the farm is working toward a common goal: quality forages!

(Edited from an article by Neil Broadwater, University of Minnesota Extension)

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