

UNL Extension: Acreage Insights

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Hay Feeding Losses?

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We are at the start of the winter hay feeding season for livestock and many acreage owners are feeding big round bales. They make the job much easier. Large bale feeding systems are designed to minimize labor but not waste. So how much of that hay are you throwing away? Depending on the feeding method, feeding losses can reach as high as 30-35 percent. You wouldn't dream of throwing away one third of the hay you are feeding to your horses or cows.

Large bales fed free-choice without a rack or feeder in muddy conditions can result in forage losses as high as 45%. That's what happens when livestock are allowed unlimited access to hay. Livestock trample, over-consume, foul on, and use for bedding 25% to 45% of the hay when it is fed with no restrictions or is not processed. Take a look to see how much hay is on the outside of the feeder and being wasted.

Hay loss and waste can be reduced by managing how often we feed and by the type of hay feeder we use. If hay is fed free choice, animals will over consume. Daily feeding forces animals to eat hay they might otherwise refuse, over-consume, trample and waste. Livestock waste less hay when the amount fed is limited to what is needed each day. One fourth more hay is needed when a four-day supply is fed with free access.

While we want to restrict the number of bales offered at one time, we should make sure that there is enough space for all animals to access the forage. Otherwise, the more aggressive animals will eat first and consume the more desirable hay, and animals that are more timid will be forced to eat the lower quality hay or go hungry.

Feeding hay in a rack or a round bale feeder limits the opportunity animals have to trample or soil hay, and reduces waste substantially. The least feeding losses occur when 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 the following percentages of feed waste for these common feeder types.

- 3.3% cone feeder
- 5.9% ring feeder with skirt
- 9% rack feeders
- 11.1% trailer feeder
- 14.2% cradle feeder

Long feeders are less effective than round or square feeders because boss animals will push others back by walking down the long feeder, interrupting their 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 saving money too.