

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The early bird gets the better hay bale

By DUANE DAILEY

TO improve hay quality, cut and bale it early. Forages cut, cured and baled in late May and early June have higher nutrient content than forages allowed to mature.

That's an oft-repeated lesson from Rob Kallenbach, University of Missouri Extension forage specialist. However, Missouri weather in prime forage season hardly ever cooperates for curing hay. So, Missourians leave a lot of hay on the stump, taking the quality loss.

There are better ways, Kallenbach reminds us. Even hay cut at the right time and rained on makes better feed than forages allowed to go to seed while leaves and stems turn to cellulose.

Or, another alternative allows baling wet hay: Baleage — which looks like large, white marshmallows — allows wrapping of damp big bales and letting the ensiling process turn hay into a silage-like feed that livestock love.

"Baleage allows harvest regardless of the weather," Kallenbach says. "Big bales are wrapped when between 50% and 60% moisture." That compares with 18% moisture or less needed to make bales that will cure and keep.

Foraging Ahead

"With baleage, more days are available for hay harvest," Kallenbach says.

There are some downsides. Done right, baleage makes excellent feed. Done wrong, it makes good compost.

The recipe calls for making baleage at 55% moisture. "Nobody hits that exactly," Kallenbach admits. But below 40% is a mistake. "It's like making silage; it must be damp or it won't ensile."

The whole baleage process is more expensive. A bale wrapper costs \$10,000 to \$12,000. The plastic wrap runs \$3 to \$3.75 per bale. That's for the individually wrapped bales. An in-line baleage wrapper, which makes those long caterpillar-like lines of hay, requires only half as much plastic. However, the machine, which puts a spiral wrap on the bales, costs about twice as much.

The tubes are best for feeding on the farm. Those bales are not as marketable, if you sell hay. Also, it's essential to make all bales the same diameter, if they are to be wrapped in line.

Baleage processing just takes more time — and that is an expense.



CARE PACKAGE: Moving big bales wrapped in plastic requires extra care so as not to tear the airtight seal. No stabbing of bales allowed!

Proper bale wrapping takes practice

BALE wrapping is a learned art. The sheets of wrapping are stretched and pulled around the bale, each sheet overlapping by about half. Four layers of plastic cover the perfect bale.

This can be a bit confusing. A well-wrapped bale has 4 mils of plastic wrap. The plastic is 2 mils thick. The trick is to stretch the plastic until it is 1 mil thick. The four layers add up to a 4-mil wrapper.

Wrapped bales require more care and maintenance. Quarter-sized holes in the wrap can cause basketball-sized rotten spots. Plastic tape is available to repair holes made by varmints. Duct tape can be used, but the special tape made for that purpose works better and lasts longer. However, it costs more.

Also, use only old-fashioned untreated sisal twine on bales to be wrapped. Treated twine dissolves the plastic, another disaster.



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