Not all silage covers are created equal

By BRIANNA DITZENBERGER

With feed prices still sky-high, managing silage forages has never been more important. Dairy farmers like John Fleming know that the dry matter is an investment worth protecting. The co-owner and feed manager at Hardie Farms near Lansing, N.Y., says: “We were confident that we were packing and managing our forage correctly, so the next step was to incorporate the oxygen barrier film. There’s no sense in letting any oxygen get to the silage, resulting in valuable losses in dry matter.”

The cost of those losses due to poorly sealed corn silage is staggering. It exceeds $250 million every year, calculates Keith Bolsen, professor emeritus of ruminant nutrition at Kansas State University. “What you choose to cover and seal your silage with matters,” he adds. “There are many products on the market to seal bunkers and drive-over piles, but not all are equal.”

Evaluate your silage covering program to ensure you’re getting a seal that will protect your investment, reduce dry matter losses and prevent surface spoilage, he advises. “There’s no room to cut corners or take the easy route when it comes to one of the last steps of silage management. What you cover with has a lasting impact on the nutritional value of what’s fed to the herd.”

What you need to know

Keep the oxygen transmission rate in mind when choosing plastic covering,” says Larry Burrows, an independent dairy nutritionist with Progressive Dairy Solutions, Kimberly, Idaho. “The lower the OTR number, the better protection for the silage.” And ask about independent lab test results to back up the product claim. Select a product that provides as close to 100% OTR as possible. That’s why Bolsen and Burrows recommend using an oxygen barrier film as the first layer to seal bunkers.

Double the layers

Hardie Farms uses a two-layer system. First, an oxygen barrier film that clings to the silage surface like a household plastic wrap, is applied. Then it’s covered with 5-mil plastic. The first prevents oxygen infiltration, while the second protects the oxygen barrier film from the damaging effects of ultraviolet light.

Hardie Farms uses two oxygen barrier film products. One brand is Silostop; the other is from Raven Industries. “We’ve noticed a large difference in the amount of visible spoilage,” testifies Fleming. “Since using the oxygen barrier film, we don’t worry about pitching or feeding mediocre silage to the cows. There’s a visual difference. More tonnage was preserved, and there’s less shrink.”

Ditzenberger writes from Madison, Wis.