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Cooperative Extension Service

Farm Update

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Bale Grazing

Thousands of round bales of hay are fed to beef cattle each winter. The number of days a farm feeds hay varies, but most begin placing hay out for cattle to consume around the beginning of November, when pasture growth declines, and continue feeding hay until the pastures begin to green up in March. Therefore, there might be as many as 150 days in which hay is made available to the herd.

How farms feed hay varies. Many farms have invested in concrete or rock surface facilities to feed hay. One advantage of this is that animals are not challenged to maneuver in mud around the hay feeders. A disadvantage of these feeding areas is that they accumulate manure, which must be removed and distributed, increasing labor and machinery expense and time that could otherwise be used for other activities. Another disadvantage is that these areas are limited in the capacity of the amount of hay they can hold, resulting in additional time required to remove hay from storage and into the feeders.

Other farms feed hay in the same general area of a pasture throughout the winter. This results in the destruction of desired forages and deep mud over a large area. The risk of soil erosion is constant, and increased energy is required to navigate the mud to access the feeders. Likewise, when these rough, pugged feeding areas are frozen, it becomes uncomfortable for the

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animals to walk and stand on. Manure accumulates around the feeder, but because it is deposited on soil and walked into the mud, it is impossible to collect the valuable nutrients for distribution onto other fields. In both systems described above, having to frequently get machinery operating in the cold of winter in mud, snow, or ice can prove challenging in and of itself.

The University of Kentucky is advocating a different approach to haying cattle: bale grazing. Bale grazing is the concept of placing hay out across the entire pasture at 2-4 tons per acre, approximately 3-4 round bales, with the goal of having enough hay out on the entire field to feed the herd 40-60 days. Bale placement would occur now, at the beginning of the hay feeding season. Strip grazing is required for this to be successful, meaning access to an electric wire around the pasture field is also required. This is your "extension cord" for a temporary electric cross-field wire to be used. The animals only have access to the number of bales necessary to meet their daily intake requirements. After a few days, when those bales have been consumed, the temp wire is relocated, giving animals access to additional hay. This process begins at the water source access of the pasture and works away from it.

Advantages: Bale grazing reduces hay feeding time by allowing bales to be delivered to the field on a large capacity wagon when fields are dry. Manure, urine, and unconsumed hay residue are distributed across the entire field. There is no need for a tractor capable of cold-temperature operation at every location you winter cattle.

The three most common bale grazing questions are… Doesn't this negate the benefit of the hay storage barn we use? No, the majority of outdoor hay storage loss occurs between summer and fall when humidity and soil temperatures are high, and rainfall is greater. Winter is cold and dry, minimizing loss while out on the field waiting to be fed. What about mud damage

during rainy periods? This is possible, but placing only 3-4 bales on each acre allows you to select the most well-drained locations. Even in the winter, soil typically settles within a few days of a significant rain. In addition, you are giving the herd access to fresh hay every few days, so they will move on from the pugged-up area before greater damage occurs. Won't this result in dead areas in my pasture next year? Yes, but small areas, only as large as the size of the bale. An option is to hand seed some Korean lespedeza and orchard grass on these locations in the spring after feeding, resulting in improved forage that benefits from the additional nutrients from manure and hay residue decay.