

Off-season: Evaluate your silage quality, bunker performance

Shawn P. Ryan for *Progressive Dairyman*

Preserving silage quality is more important than ever with rising commodity costs. Feedout of last year's crop is the best time to evaluate how your silage quality and bunker/pile storage are performing, so you can set goals and begin

planning for storing next year's crop. There are several important facets to consider during goal setting, including employee training and education, visual quality checks, dry matter testing and proper face management.

“The storage process doesn't end when the last few tires or gravel bags go on.”

Training and education

A vital and often overlooked management aspect to maintaining silage quality is the training of new employees on techniques and reasons why certain tasks are necessary and the science behind them. Floyd Bork, general manager of Quail Ridge Dairy and Badger Creek Dairy, located in Colorado, emphasizes the importance of continual training and education when it comes to forage management practices, especially in entry-level

positions where turnover is more frequent. Bork oversees around 70 employees with the assistance of middle managers and strives to keep training and safety a top priority. Chris and Mary Kraft, owners of the two facilities Bork manages, encourage attending feeding conferences and expanding employee knowledge. Keeping current on changes in forage storage technologies and other aspects of production is an important and constant piece of any feed management program, and Bork stays current by reading industry publications, attending clinics and hosting on-farm demonstrations that focus on a variety of aspects associated with operation management.

Between the two operations, Bork employs two different styles for storing forage – open piles and bunkers. In total, 2,500 acres of alfalfa and around 2,000 acres of corn are planted and harvested for alfalfa haylage and corn silage for use on both operations. Quail Ridge Dairy milks 4,100 cows, and the Badger Creek Dairy operation is home to 1,000 fresh and hospital cows.

Bork stresses the importance of communication between owners, managers, employees and nutritionists to keep quality feed in the rations. He takes measures to ensure all steps of the forage storing process are considered and evaluated. Everything from selecting crop hybrids and varieties, harvesting, proper forage packing, covering, face management and ration mixing is meticulously calculated to ensure the highest-quality forage is fed at both operations.

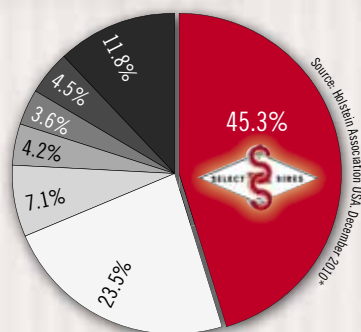
Visual quality check

Producers should continually evaluate forage (silage/haylage) quality during feedout of the bunker or pile and at a minimum do a visual check of quality on a daily basis. The storage

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process doesn't end when the last few tires or gravel bags go on. During feedout, be sure to regularly walk and inspect the surface and look for damage from rodents, birds and other vermin. If damage is discovered, seal any holes discovered with repair tape. The visual walk also should involve a check of the weights on top of the plastic that can be displaced by silage settling over time. Reposition any tires or gravel bags to ensure effective sealing.

During visual checks of the bunkers/piles, Bork noticed jackrabbits to be an issue with damage to storage coverings in his region of the country. Visual quality checks allow him to catch the rips and tears right away to stop oxygen from catalyzing spoilage and costing the operation money. Prioritizing time to inspect bunkers and piles at the two operations has proved successful for Bork, and he has noticed less spoilage since using a clear film from Silostop under the standard sheet of plastic layer. Evaluation and success measures can utilize visual silage checks to gauge progress.

Weekly dry matter testing

Monitoring silage/haylage dry matter content on a weekly basis is a valuable tool that can be utilized to evaluate and balance forage rations. A greater net profit is the primary reason producers need to know the quality of the forages they are feeding, and weekly monitoring of bunker or pile contents allows producers to examine effects of feed composition and quality on milk production. Bork takes weekly samples on Monday and by Thursday morning has results he can use to adjust rations and ensure feeding of the proper nutrients and provisions to the herds. If the ration isn't exact, weekly tests allow Bork to easily adjust. Additionally, weekly dry matter evaluation can uncover hot spots or inadequate feedout practices. Evaluations also provide learning opportunities for employees to ensure everyone is on the same page when it comes to forage quality and face management.

Proper face management

Proper face management is another aspect important to preserving silage quality during feedout. A shaver works best to keep the face as flat and smooth as possible. Remove at least six inches daily in colder months and at least 12 inches daily in warmer months. During feedout, ensure the leading edge of the cover remains sealed to minimize heating and spoilage by maintaining an oxygen-free zone.

On the Quail Ridge and Badger Creek dairy operations, face management is an important component of the overall bunker

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performance plan. Bork uses a silage shaver to remove around 14 inches per day across the entire feedout surface to keep fresh feed in the feeding trough and prevent aerobic spoilage. Also, evaluation of face management by outside consultants gives a checkpoint for storage management alterations.

Face management evaluation may uncover safety hazards as well as forage quality concerns. Remember to use precautions to prevent injury or even death while packing or while feeding out. Every step of forage management has safety issues and should be approached with an informed mind.

Achieving quality forage goes far beyond choosing the right hybrids and harvesting techniques; it encompasses meticulous planning, goal setting and diligent attention to detail. Executing these management practices during the off-season may cost producers extra time up front, but in the end, pays huge dividends. **PD**



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