

Think twice before you use tires on silage clamps

When Andrew and Simon Hall were wondering what on earth was wrong with their cows, they had no idea that the answer was going to be as simple as it was. The answer? The wire from the tyres used to secure the plastic on top of their silage clamps was being eaten by the cows and piercing their guts.

“We spent sleepless nights for 18 months wondering what we were doing wrong,” they said. “We struggled to know what was killing our animals. We saw our average daily yields of 31 litres plummet to 21 litres, and our best cows dying. Our replacement rate was running far too high, dashing our hopes of boosting cow numbers.”

Milking 230 Holsteins averaging just under 10,000 litres, on an all-year round calving system that was chosen for its very simplicity, Andrew and his brother Simon, and son Matt, became worried beyond belief when their cows started dying without any proper explanation.

A change of vet prompted a change of investigation for the mystery disease. A decision was made to ‘open up’ one of the suspect animals, one that would sometimes perform, but at other times not – as if fading away - to see exactly what was going on inside the cow.

Mike Murphy and Tracy Towers from Oakhill Veterinary Centre near Preston, soon solved the mystery. What they found, which was a great relief to the farm team, was a piece of wire embedded into the cows’ gut wall. Andrew couldn't believe that he hadn't seen the problem for himself.

“When we started to look around the farm with this in mind, all we could see were the opportunities for the cows to ingest wire. Our silage pit was full of tyres, and the wire would spring out once they were disturbed. In other words, tires being swept up by the front end loader, moving them to place on top of the silage clamp, providing opportunities for the place to be littered with wire.

“We couldn't believe we had been so stupid,” says Andrew, who now shouts from the rooftops that anyone putting tires on silage clamps ‘must be mad’.

“Here we were, poisoning our cows in a most barbaric way. The pain, the agony, that they went through... yet we had no idea. We felt incredibly embarrassed about it, and guilty too,” he adds.

“Looking back it seems unbelievable that we used old tires with wire inside to cover our most precious feed source – silage,” says Andrew, who realised that the wire was positioning itself in different ways inside the cow and, as it moved around, sometimes the animal would seem fine, making the problem very tricky to detect.

Delighted with the explanation, the next steps were to find out which cows had got wire inside them, and how to stop others from following the same route. Bolus magnets were quickly adopted, and highlighted the scale of the problem. There was wire everywhere, and all stock were at risk as silage was being fed on a TMR basis.

Their first call to action was to remove all tyres from the farm, brush and steam clean the silage pit base, and the surrounding yards. “You couldn't imagine how much wire we found,” he says.

"The next question was how we were going to ensile silage correctly to protect our most important feed source on the farm." And this is when a silage product, introduced by local distributors Shepherd Agri in Preston, came to the rescue and, according to Andrew, "miraculously changed our lives forever." They suggested using a product which they explained was a complete oxygen barrier system. They introduced Silostop film, unique in its oxygen properties as it is the only proven oxygen barrier film. At 45 microns thick, it's thin, and therefore clings to the contours of the silage, pushing the air out, and stopping air from entering via transmission through the plastic. The film was added to the top of the clamp in a single layer, with its orange colour proving quite a local talking point. As well as only needing one layer, which itself offered a cost saving, using Silostop meant every bit of the harvested crop was ready to feed. The company recommends using protective netting over the film, to protect from physical damage, and gravel bags laid around all the edges, any joins, and crosshatched over the entire pit.

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"What we didn't expect from using Silostop was that the silage looked completely different too," says Andrew. "There was absolutely no waste at all. We've all been used to the first half foot of the silage clamp being removed as waste, before seeing the edible stuff, but this was a complete revelation. We suddenly had a lot more value in the clamp. It was 100% edible.

"Not only were we feeding wire-free silage, we were also feeding the best quality, consistent, feed. Every handful counted. We never thought this would be possible," he says.

With 400 head of stock at Hale Farm, near Kirkham, Preston, and Andrew farming in partnership with his brother Simon, and son Matt, the family all work hard in growing the grass, cutting and gathering it. The job is time sensitive, and dictated largely by the weather, yet it was at the very final stage - the ensiling - where things were going horribly wrong and this was "right under our noses," he says.

The farm team is both relieved and enlightened after this ordeal, and now knows their cows are healthy and see they'll confidently be able to push cow numbers up to 250. Andrew even admits that they're getting quite paranoid about striving for the most hygienic clamp of silage possible, right down to the quality of gravel used in his silage bags. "After all, by doing so, you're maximising your energy content and of course the dry matter content in each and every mouthful." "We look at everything now, and question it, whereas before we assumed all was well - simply because that was always the way we did things." he adds.

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