

Yet another reason to scrap the bale processor!

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It seems this winter there is no end of discussions on high fuel prices, iron cost and how everything keeps getting more and more expensive. Most people are in the midst of winter feeding and many are about to start calving, so its hard not to notice all the time, money and effort being spent to get the cow herd through another winter. Well, count you're lucky stars.... government has noticed too and recently Alberta Agriculture published a research project on the effects of bale processing and bale unrolling on feed wastage. Well I just couldn't help myself and so I figured it's about time to fire up the old cutting torch on one of my favorite subjects; "Bale Processors".

To save you all the hassle of reading the study, what the researchers found was: by feeding bred heifers 90% for recommended dry matter intake (DMI) , they had 19% feed losses using bale processors, 12% losses by using a bale unroller and 0% losses by chopping the feed into another new invention: "a processed bale feeder".

Now, I warned these guys that I was going to take a swipe at this project and so here is an even simpler way of feeding cattle and minimizing their feed wastage...."Keep them hungry". If you don't believe me, watch how much food disappears off the kitchen table if you're hungry and the serving bowls are not quite as full. I have always been adamant that winter feeding programs need to be built around rations that are maintenance and/or even allow cows to loose weight over the winter months. You're winter feeding program begins the previous year in late summer and fall by making sure your cow herd goes into winter in good to excellent body condition. Then you use that body condition to not only reduce the amount of feed your cows need but also the amount that they will waste by limit feeding them.

The animal type (bred heifers) in this study is probably the first flaw that I have a problem with in this trial. Even though heifers were supposedly restricted to 90% of DMI, they were probably still being overfed. Why? Well, I have yet to visit a research station that pushes cattle like real life producers do. I think restricting them to 80% of DMI would have been a better idea. A better study animal would also have been mature cows.

Which brings me to my next point, if there was 0% feeding wastage using a feeder, then why not just put the bale in the feeder and be done with it? Wouldn't this make more sense than burning diesel and iron to get the cows fed?

There are many that have clued into the fact that by feeding cattle on the pastures, during the winter months there is no manure to haul the next spring. So, of course, I hear producers justify their shredder because it allows them to efficiently feed their cattle this way. Well there's nothing holding anyone back from feeding in those same pastures with round bale feeders either. Not only can you reduce the wastage, you can also move the feeders once an area is mucked up enough and still get incredible pasture production the next year, and you don't need a twine chopper to do it. Or then again you could just roll out the bales and gain an 8% reduction in feed wastage and burn that much less diesel.

Now that I have thrown in my 2 cents on this study, I would also like to give some credit; although the authors should have been louder and prouder of making mention of it. Remember the quoted feed wastage was 19%, 12% and 0% respectively for the processor, roller and the feeder. What is interesting was what actual feed component was wasted. It was the best stuff out of those bales.... The fines!

I have a good friend that told me this and I will steal his quote: "Bale processors can make crappy feed better but more often than not, they are great at making excellent feed - worse". This study proved that point. The researchers used 4 different forages in the test...alfalfa, alfalfa/grass, grass and greenfeed.

Alfalfa, which has higher leaf content, will generate more nutrient - dense fines. Field observations indicated that the fines accumulate in the bottom of the windrow from the processed feed. Likewise greenfeed harvested beyond the mid-dough stage had more grain shelling, leading to higher grain content in the fines after processing. Feeds with higher fines content after processing were more susceptible to higher feeding losses. So to put it more bluntly, not only was there higher feed losses with the bale processor, but the component that was wasted was the best quality stuff from those bales. But if that's not enough, I ask those researchers this – "Did you measure the feed quality of the big green cloud that was blowing behind the bale processor... Did anyone get grab samples of that and quantify it?"

I have always said bale processors were simply invented because people were too lazy to cut twine. Now there is research that shows you're not just burning up too much diesel and iron to feed your cows. You're also wasting more if you're feeding it on the snow and biggest component that you're wasting is the best stuff from those bales.

Some winter feeding tips to minimize feed wastage and the cost of feeding it:

- ✓ Start your winter feeding program out by making sure you have fat cows to do it with.
- ✓ Limit feed your ration – provided the nutritional requirements for your cows are met, there is no rule that says cows have to be full all the time.
- ✓ Feeding on the ground is best suited for animals that do not need to gain weight.
- ✓ If you're goal is next to no feed wastage – just use a good quality round bale feeder.
- ✓ Feed in the fields and on your pastures to eliminate manure handling.
- ✓ Feed poor quality feed in feeders and roll the good stuff out so all the cows can get access; then just sit back and watch them clean their plates.
- ✓ Keep it simple and minimize things that burn fuel and that have moving parts.
- ✓ Don't forget that a cow has a pretty incredible digestive system for dealing with roughages; she is obligated to work for you and not the reverse.

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