

Managing Beef Cow Margins: Round bale pitfalls

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Cow-calf production is best viewed as the business of producing and marketing grass. The most successful and profitable cow-calf operations are generally those that most efficiently use grazed forage. However, seasonally limited quantity and/or quality of grazed forage means that producers often need additional nutrition in the form of harvested forages or purchased supplemental feed. Most beef cow-calf operations rely on grass hay to help meet cow nutritional needs. A variety of grasses are harvested as hay to provide supplemental protein and energy for cattle. The quality of grass hay varies widely depending on the type of forage; the management/condition of the forage; baling conditions; and quality degradation during storage. For example, well-fertilized Brome grass, harvested early will have 10-12 percent crude protein and total digestible nutrients (TDN) over 55 percent. Crude protein in under-fertilized, mature Brome will drop below 7 percent with TDN less than 50 percent. Prairie hay typically has crude protein values between 6 and 8 percent and TDN of 50-52 percent. If harvested late and very mature these values may drop to 4 or 5 percent for crude protein with TDN below 50 percent. Whether purchased or produced, it is critical for producers to know the quality of hay. Round bales of unknown quality and bale weight, subject to significant storage and feeding losses is wasteful, expensive and make it very difficult to manage cow herd nutrition. Round bale technology is convenient and saves labor. Unfortunately, the convenience of round bales has also frequently encouraged production of low quality hay and poor storage and feeding management. Often hay production is a residual to poor pasture management where mature, rank grass that was not grazed effectively is baled. Good pasture management and good hay management are two sides of the same coin. The labor saving and convenience of round bales has, in many cases, fostered poor pasture management that results in increased hay needs and production of poor quality hay.

Perhaps rounds bales are too convenient. In days of old, producers feeding small square bales were typically more aware of the quality of the hay, how much they were feeding, how much was being wasted and, as a result, often did a better job of managing cow herd nutrition and feed cost. It takes some additional management to capture the advantages of round bales without wasting hay and incurring additional cost.

Hay production per beef cow has more than doubled in the past 40. It appears that now significantly more hay is wasted and that poor pasture management has increased the number of days that cows are fed hay. Round bales very probably have contributed to this trend.

Considerations for round bale use:

- Manage the quantity and quality of pastures to extend grazing and minimize hay needs. Consider stockpiling pasture for fall and winter grazing. Feeding hay costs 2.5 to 5 times as much as grazing. Every day that cows graze instead of receiving hay will save \$0.50 to \$1.50 per head in feed costs.
- Know the quantity and quality of purchased or produced hay. Buy tons of hay... not bales. Weigh it and test it.
- Know how much hay cows are actually eating. Measure storage and feeding losses in order to know actual consumption and the true cost of hay.
- Calculate the cost of hay nutrients compared to other supplemental feed sources. Projected record grain crops mean that energy and protein from other feed sources will likely be cheaper this winter. Supplements using grain and/or byproduct feeds may actually be less expensive than poor quality hay.