

## **SUCCESSFULLY FEEDING LARGE ROUND BALES THIS WINTER**

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The wide usage of large package, round bales for feeding beef herds has made hay feeding more labor efficient, but may offer a number of management challenges to producers who wish to maintain superior hay quality.

### **ASSESS HAY NEEDS EARLY**

Do not wait until you are running low on hay supplies in the winter to start looking for hay. Assess hay needs early so that additional hay can be located or cattle numbers be decreased, if necessary. The "cow unit" method is a quick way for assessing hay needs. Allow about 25 to 30 pounds of hay per cow unit. Count each 1000 pounds of cattle as a "unit," or count each cow as a unit, each calf as about one-half unit and each bull as 2 units. Decide how many days you will be feeding hay (120 to 150 days would be typical). Multiply the number of cow units by the pounds of hay per cow unit and multiply this by the number of days they will be fed. Then match your hay needs with the amount of hay you have in storage.

### **HAY FEEDING**

Start with a forage test. It is difficult to accurately appraise hay visually and forage tests are relatively inexpensive. A good supplement program is difficult to implement without forage testing. You will either feed too much supplement, too little supplement or the wrong kind unless you forage test and balance a ration based on the results of that test. Talk to your Extension agent about having forages tested and assistance in ration balancing.

Significant hay losses during feeding can be prevented if certain feeding management

practices are implemented. Probably the most common method of avoiding large package hay loss during feeding is to use a hay "ring" or other type of hay feeder, such as a wagon which has been modified to allow hay feeding.

A number of cattle producers advocate unrolling large round bales for feeding. This will work if cattle are provided the correct amount of hay for one feeding when the hay is unrolled. However, excess hay will quickly become bedding. Mechanical hay unrollers are available, but alternative methods, such as unrolling on a hillside, may work in certain areas. Exercise caution when unrolling hay on a hillside, because a large round bale can become a safety hazard.

Other tips:

- **Stay out of muddy areas (if possible).** If you have a rocky outcrop or old road bed, this works well for minimizing mud. Other producers create a bed of coarse gravel over geotextile cloth (details available from Extension agents or Farm Services Agency).
- **Cut the strings as you feed.** This makes it easier on the cows and may reduce the tangling of strings around the base of the hay feeder. Removing the strings takes even longer, but makes the feeding area easier to recover in the spring.
- **Slightly hungry cows clean up better.** If you are "stretching" hay supplies, it may pay to allow cows a little longer to clean up previously fed hay, but avoid this when cold fronts are approaching or if cows are thin (feed to maintain cows in body condition score of 5 or higher; county agents have more information on condition scoring system).