

Bales Left in The Field Can Be Costly

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In late summer, we see many bales scattered among recently harvested fields across the province. While hay bales may make the countryside more scenic, there is a cost to leaving hay on the field longer than necessary. And while it's convenient to leave bales in the field after the final cut of the year, delaying removal can be harmful and cost future yields when more harvests are expected.



One problem is that the forage plants directly under the bale or stack will be smothered until the bale is removed. The longer the bale stays in one spot, the less likely the forage will recover. Plants are often killed if covered for more than a week or two. This may not hurt yield too much, but it makes for a great place for weeds like dandelions to get started and quickly spread.

Greater damage, though, is due to wheel traffic on the regrowth. Even when bales are removed immediately after harvest before regrowth starts, yields could be about 5-7% less at the next cutting. This gets much worse if you wait to remove bales. By delaying removal just seven days after cutting, when regrowth shoots have started to grow, yield could be reduced by over 25% and fewer plants may survive. Further damage occurs if you are removing bales when fields are wet. Wheel traffic will cause compaction and yield loss exceeding 30%.

Hay fields must be driven on to remove bales after harvest, but you can lessen damage and future yield loss by controlling where, when and how often you drive. Minimize the amount of driving done on wet soils and follow the same wheel track when removing bales or stacks from fields to limit the total area damaged.

Another potential loss is damage to the bale. Bales left in the field often flatten out and soften. Loading, handling and hauling those bales can be difficult as some of the bales will fall apart and dry matter losses will increase. A bale left in the field is exposed to the elements in all directions. If three inches of the outside surface of a 5 x 6 bale is spoiled,

it represents about 30% of the hay in that bale. In a 1,500 pound or (682 kg) bale, a 30% loss represents 450 pounds (204 kg) of hay. Storing bales reduces the number of exposed surfaces and can reduce losses, especially if shelter can be provided.

Once the bales have cooled, the bales can be taken to the feed-yard and stacked. Unless the bales are used for bale grazing, leaving that hay out in the fields until freeze-up can prove expensive.

In many parts of the province, most of the cost of a hay bale is in cutting and baling, not the forage itself. There are definite benefits of baling and removing bales from hay fields as quickly as possible after cutting.