



Hay Storage Considerations: Don't Waste it!

Now may be a good time to think about hay storage. In some parts of the Northeast haymaking has been tough due to the drought conditions. Make sure you put more thought into storage so less waste will occur.

Large bales are a convenient form of hay for one-person operations. These bales can be moved, stored and fed relatively easily with the right equipment. Hay loss can occur when baling, moving and feeding so some is unavoidable. The biggest loss – both dry matter and digestibility – occurs with outdoor storage. Dry matter loss can reach 50% depending on the beginning quality, storage conditions and length of storage. It is not always realistic or practical to build a barn to store hay. Here are some tips to minimize waste from outdoor storage.

Hay that has been tightly baled tends to shed water better. The outer layer forms a thatch to reduce water infiltration. What helps with shedding precipitation is placing the bales lined up tightly together end to end. Pick a site that has good ventilation, away from hedgerows and wooded areas. This gives bales a better chance to dry out from air movement. Row spacing of at least 3 feet for good air flow and sunlight penetration is an excellent strategy. It's also a good idea to keep vegetation mowed between rows.

Ideally, bales should be stored off the ground. Hay stored directly on the ground may lose up to 12 inches on the bottom of the bales due to wicking action. Find some waste material such as old fence posts, pallets or tires and place the bales on top. Gravel or stone may work too. Research was conducted by University of Tennessee animal scientists comparing different methods of storing large round bales of grass hay on operations in the state. The hay was cut and baled in June. The bales were weighed at the time of harvest and storage. Then they were weighed again the following January at the time of winter feeding. The following table lists the type of storage and the resulting percentage hay loss.

Losses of Hay Stored using Six Methods of Storage

Type of Storage	Percentage (%) Hay Loss
On ground, no cover	37%
On tires, no cover	29%
On ground, covered	29%
On tires, covered	8%
Net wrap on ground	19%
In barn	6%

Note the difference between storage in the barn and on tires, covered. Some small changes can make a big difference! Plastic tarps can be relatively inexpensive when the saving from reducing loss is calculated.