

## Don't Let Bad Feed Hurt Your Herd

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“I’ve lost one cow and have several others off feed. Most of the cows have loose manure, and production is way down. I wonder if it is due to the wet ryelage.” This message came from Henry, whose herd I served as nutritionist. “Let’s stop the ryelage and feed more of the oatlage. I will adjust the protein in the ration to compensate. Offer some dry hay as well. I will stop at the farm in a couple of days to see how things are going,” was my reply.

The story behind the call was that Henry had put up some wet ryelage the previous spring, testing 71% moisture. Ash was somewhat high at 13%, implying soil contamination. Butyric acid was also slightly elevated. This combination raised concern that clostridium organisms might proliferate in this feed, with the potential to cause illness and possibly death. Before any of it was fed, it was covered in the upright silo with first cutting haylage.

This gave Henry and me a dilemma. He had about 30 tons of potentially dangerous feed already in the silo. Do we feed it or throw it away? As indicated above, we decided to feed a limited amount at four pounds of dry matter, to go with four pounds of dry matter from oatlage and 21 pounds from corn silage. One half pound of sodium bicarbonate was also included. I thought this combination would be safe.

For about two weeks, I appeared to be right in this assumption, but then matters changed, prompting Henry’s phone call. When I stopped at the farm two days later, things appeared to be slightly improved. No more cows had died, and the ones off feed were eating again. There was still a lot of loose manure, and milk production was still depressed.

I resampled the wet ryelage, which now had a bad “rotten egg” smell, indicating high levels of butyric acid. A lab retest confirmed this fact. I presume that within the section of the silo containing this ryelage was a pocket of material that got more dirt into than others. The clostridial bacteria are present in soil, and wet forage often means wet ground, which means more mud is harvested along with the forage. The organisms multiply well in the wet silage, producing the toxins that cause illness in the cows. Henry ended up spreading the rest of the wet ryelage onto his fields. The cows gradually recovered, and milk production slowly improved.

The lesson to be learned from this story is that forage quality does not only impact production. Sometimes it affects the health of your animals as well. Proper fermentation requires forages to be harvested at the right stage of maturity and then packed quickly and completely to force out oxygen. Forages made either too wet or too dry tend to contain either bad bacteria or mold that is detrimental to health.

We are fast approaching the time of spring forage harvest. Many times there is a short window of good weather when we can get crops dried to the proper levels, usually between

sixty and seventy percent moisture. Be sure your equipment is serviced and ready to go when that window happens. Small grain silage and haylage are prone to soil contamination if the ground is wet, and if that is combined with the forage being harvested wet, a formula for disaster has been created.