

News column for use week of November 25, 2024  
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## **The Risks of Offering Wrapped Hay Bales to Cattle**

When driving in Kansas, it is easy to spot big, round hay bales that are wrapped in plastic and ready to be fed to cattle. When it is time to feed the bale, some producers put the hay with the wrap on in a grinder and chop it up together, while others choose to remove the wrap before offering free choice hay to the herd. Wrapping hay bales can preserve the quality of the hay and prevent it from deteriorating over time. Hay bales exposed to the elements are susceptible to moisture, which can lead to mold and bacterial growth. However, it's important to take the risks associated with feeding wrapped hay bales to cattle into account.

Even chopped plastic can form a ball in a cow's gut that will accumulate over time and can in some cases lead her to die. This has to do with how feed moves through the rumen, which is a chamber in the cow's stomach. As the feed passes through the rumen in the normal digestion process of a beef animal. There is a liquid layer that the feed must sink through to get to the next chamber called the reticulum. The particles must be dense enough to sink into the reticulum, but plastic pieces are very light so they float and can accumulate in the rumen over time. Death can happen when the plastic has accumulated to form a ball and acts like a plug either preventing gas release or passage down the digestive tract.

Eating chopped plastic is a greater challenge for cows than for cattle at a feedlot because of the years of a cow's life versus that of a feedlot steer. A greater percentage of a cow's diet is hay, and she consumes it over a lifetime. Compared to a steer who only has about 10% of his diet as hay and he is only in the feedyard for about five months before being processed. The best strategy for the herd is to remove all plastic wrap before offering the hay to the herd. Along with the lessened risk of digestive issues, removing the wrap is also physically safer for the cattle. Wrap can get stomped into the mud and get tangled around their legs, which in some cases leads to lameness for the animal.

If you have any questions, feel free to stop by or contact me in the Washington office, 785-325-2121 or [khildebrand@ksu.edu](mailto:khildebrand@ksu.edu).

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