

Salvaging Feed After a Fire

OPTIONS AFTER SMOKE, WATER OR FIRE DAMAGE

SILAGE

The best rule for fire-damaged feed may be, “Assume the worst until proven otherwise.” Damage to feed may come from heat, water, chemicals, smoke or the fire itself. In some cases, you may have a total loss; in other cases, you may be able to salvage all or part of your feed. But for the safety of your animals, either dispose of or test any suspicious feed. If you feed contaminated, moldy or otherwise damaged feed, you risk lowered production, illness or death in your animals. At the least, animals may refuse to eat feed that has been charred or has an odor.

- ◆ *Damaged silage* must be unloaded because:
 - a) Overheated silage has lost its nutritional value.
 - b) The top layers of wet silage may spoil or be unacceptable to animals.
 - c) Any missed hot spots may reignite.
- ◆ *Heat damage and fire damage.* Silage that has been heated above 150 degrees F. loses much of its nutritional value. Charred silage also will have little feed value; cows may not eat it, depending on taste or aroma. In some instances, cows actually eat more heat-damaged silage to try to compensate for the lost nutritional value. To determine quality of overheated silage, send it to a feed testing laboratory. Silage below the fire level will not be damaged and will not lose any nutritional value.
- ◆ *Water damage.* Silage saturated with water may mold and spoil because much of the preserving acid produced during fermentation has leached out or been diluted. The nutritional value of the saturated silage is reduced and the cows may refuse to eat it. Consider spreading it on land as a fertilizer.

GRAIN AND HAY

- ◆ *Debris.* Be aware that metal, lead paint, nails from the roof or other debris may have fallen into the feed during firefighting. Disposing of grain may be your best option if debris has compromised the feed.
- ◆ *Darkened or burned feed.* These have been oxidized and, therefore, nutritional value has been reduced. Animals most likely won't eat these feeds. Dispose of them or spread them on fields as fertilizer.
- ◆ *Wet feeds.* It may be difficult or impossible to dry wet grain or hay naturally. If these feeds are readily available and clean (no chance of chemical contamination or fire-fighting debris), feed them to livestock. Recognize that wet feeds may have only a few days of “shelf life” before spoilage occurs. Otherwise, spread them on fields as fertilizer or dispose of them.
- ◆ *Baled hay.* Small quantities may be dried naturally if broken apart. Larger quantities are generally a loss because of the difficulty of drying. Hay quickly spoils when wet—and moldy hay may be dangerously toxic to animals. If possible, spread hay on fields as a fertilizer or dispose of it.

Additional resources:

Your county agricultural agent, your veterinarian, forage testing laboratories

Related publications:

“Extinguishing Silo Fires,” (NRAES-18), Northeast Regional Agricultural Engineering Service.