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Net Wrap and its Problems

We are experiencing the first real cold snap of the year in Southeast Kansas. The frigid temperatures make me dread the task of pulling net wrap off the round bale of hay. Stick with me here, this train of thought has several cars; I'll try not to get derailed.

Large round bales are typically wrapped in plastic netting to keep the preserved forage from degrading during storage. The net wrap does a wonderful job in preserving the hay for months, even years. The plastic net wrap sheds rain and snow, allowing the hay underneath to be protected. The bale is held together to be transported from the field of harvest to a storage site and possibly moved a few more times before it's fed to livestock. A fun aspect of net wrap is the variety of colors available, hay harvesters can show their patriotism with red, white and blue wraps, or support their favorite school – Go, K-State!

Regardless of the attributes, this plastic net wrap can still be a pain. Removing it in icy conditions can be downright painful, not to mention time consuming. And then, once you get the wrap off the bale, you're stuck with a ball of plastic that doesn't have much use, even for the most inventive crafter. Because of the hay fibers and soil intertwined with the plastic, recycling is nearly impossible. Burning it releases unfavorable particulates. By the very nature of product, it will not bio-degrade. Leaving the wrap on the back of the feed truck to be blown off into a ditch is frowned upon. The only option left is to dispose of it with the household trash, to be hauled to a landfill.

Or, I suppose one option left unstated is to leave the wrap on the bale when feeding; that gets us into a whole other list of issues. At the least, the wrap will get tangled around feet, and it will accumulate bale after bale. At the most, livestock will ingest this plastic.

K-State veterinarian Bob Larson and K-State beef cattle nutritionist Phillip Lancaster discussed the consequences of not removing the net wrap during a recent Cattle Chat Podcast episode. Ruminant animals like cows, sheep, goats and deer have four chambers in their digestive system. The largest of these chambers, the rumen, has a liquid layer that their food must sink through to get to the next chamber, the reticulum. The plastic pieces of net wrap will accumulate in the rumen, creating blockage for normal digestion; inhibiting proper passage of gases and nutrients.

While time is certainly not a cheap commodity, one may well be trading a few minutes in cold weather for hours of working with livestock with digestive issues, or, worse yet, losing expensive stock.

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