

That's An Expensive Bale Of Hay You Have There!
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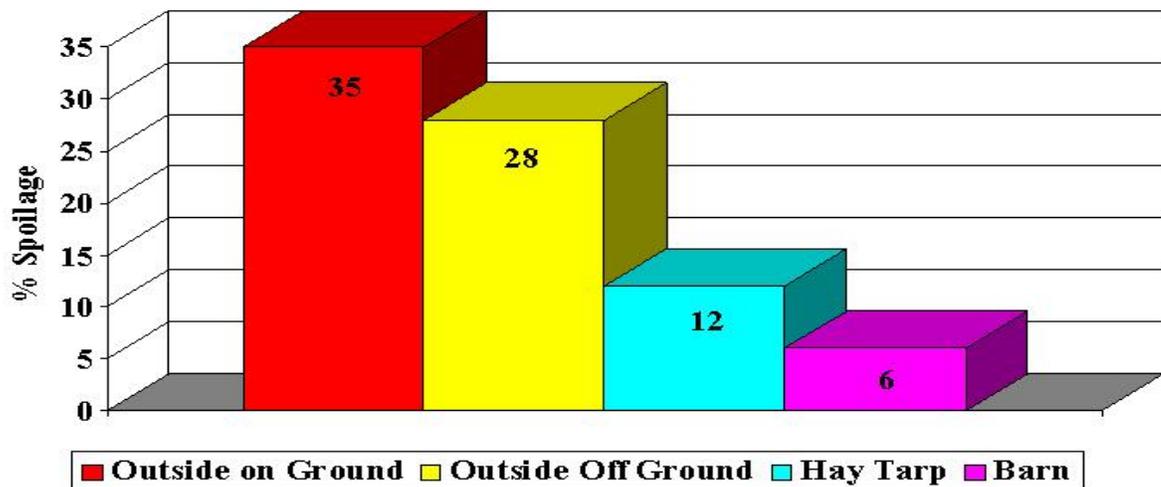
Feeding hay during the fall and winter is a more costly operation than most producers realize. October is a month when north Georgia has an advantage over south Georgia concerning forage availability. The reason is simple, tall fescue. Tall fescue is recovering from the summer heat and providing good grazing for cattle. South Georgia, on the other hand, is in a forage void period. The bermudagrass pastures are going dormant and the winter annual grasses are being planted. This means that producers must begin feeding stored feed or hay. Regardless of where a producer lives in the state, there will be a time over the winter when feeding hay becomes a necessity. For this reason, the topics of hay cost, storage, and feeding is timely.

On average, a beef cattle operation in the southeast United States spends approximately 25% of the total yearly cost on winter feeding. This includes pastures, hay, and supplemental feeds. Forage grazed from a pasture is one of the cheapest form of winter feed so grazing, when possible, should be the primary source of forage grass. Hay, on the other hand, is an expensive form of winter feed. The cost to cut, rake and bale a round bale of bermudagrass hay is estimated at \$15 (\$30/ton). This does not include the cost of producing the grass, land taxes, depreciation of equipment, and other costs. According to The University of Georgia 2001 Crop Enterprise Cost Analysis estimates, putting up a ton of bermudagrass hay cost \$60.38. Not included in this figure is storage and feeding losses. The point here is that hay is valuable and needs to be treated as a valuable commodity.

Knowing the quality of the hay fed can allow producers to more efficiently use supplemental feeds. Testing the hay allows producers to know the protein and energy content that is being fed. Adjustments can be made to the amount of supplement needed by different groups of cattle. Feed lower quality hay to dry cows and bulls on maintenance diets while saving high quality hay for calves and lactating cows. It cost substantially less to supplement an animal on high quality hay than one on low quality hay.

Once you know the quality of the hay in storage, the next step is to protect it; on dry ground or off the ground, better yet is a hay tarp, or best is under a barn. The figure below from a University of Tennessee study illustrates the percentage of loss to round bales stored under different conditions. A 30% loss to hay bales while stored amounts to an estimated cost of \$9.00/1000 lb bale or \$19.50/ton. This loss to producers can easily exceed the cost of buying hay tarps or even building a hay barn. Protecting hay, particularly high quality hay, should be a

priority for Georgia cattlemen.



The last area concerning feeding hay during the winter is how it is fed. Cattle will consume the better parts of a bale of hay that they can reach first and often refuse to eat the outer layer of the bale or hay that has been trampled on the ground. The amount of hay refused or uneaten varies with the quality of the hay and method of feeding. Estimates of loss can be 30% of the bale or higher. This unused hay represents a loss to the producer in the form of increased costs of baling, transporting, storage, and feeding more hay to the herd. The simplest method of improving feeding efficiency is to put the bale in a hay ring. Another factor is the amount of hay fed at one time. Feeding only the amount of hay needed by the animals for one to two days will decrease the chance of open bales being exposed to rain and less trampling of the hay. Moisture is the enemy of hay, so try not to place bales in areas with the potential to get wet or muddy such as near water tanks or low areas of the pasture. One last item is to move the location where bales of hay are fed around the pasture so that older, possibly moldy, hay will not be mixed with fresh hay which could increase the chance of animal refusal.

To the cattle producers of Georgia, you have a valuable commodity in your hay. Know what the quality of that hay is, protect it, and feed it out carefully. The efficiency and profitability of your cattle operation can be increased using good hay management practices.