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BeefTalk: Eliminate Complacency -- Make Those Round Bales Big and Tie Them Tight

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Complacency in agriculture just doesn't work, especially in the beef cattle business--and neatly wrapped big bales are one part of that equation. Another part of the equation includes a cow herd -- mouths that need feed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That isn't a problem during this time of the year, but preparations need to be made to keep all of the mouths fed and happy during the non-growing season.

At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, a reality check involves reviewing the feed inventory. Last year, the center fed 1,566 tons of forage, 249 tons of concentrates, and 16 tons of

supplements for a total of 1,831 tons of feed. The year before, we fed 1,303 tons of forage, 63 tons of concentrates and 14 tons of supplements for a total of 1,380 tons of total feed. It took 89 semi loads of feed to meet last years feed needs.

Highway travelers can appreciate a well-tied bale. Have you ever pulled up behind a semi with loosely tied bales and wondered if you dared pass the truck because a bale or part of it appeared ready to fall on you, your passengers and your vehicle? Occasionally, an astute smaller producer stops and forks in the loose hay that accumulates at the side of the road when a load of poorly tied bales finally gives in to the inevitable.

Do you ever wonder where all the hay goes that travels down the road? Well some of it comes to the center, but not much of it. The local feed store was loading out feed the other day to travel to the southeastern United States. The local paper carries a significant number of ads listing hay 300 or more miles away. If I'm paying \$2.50 per loaded mile, and the load only has 20 tons, those 300 miles are going to cost \$750, or \$37.50 per ton. But I guess it never hurts to advertise.

There is a fundamental principle and reason that beef cattle exist. As ruminants, they are uniquely designed to harvest forage, which mankind is unable to use as a food. That forage was originally local with the cattle moving to the forage, not the forage moving to the cattle. Perhaps things have changed. The center has never had a problem buying locally produced hay that can be shipped at \$5 to \$7.50 per ton. That figures to \$2.50 per loaded mile, 20 tons per load or 12.5 cents per mile per ton transportation costs.

Cutting costs in the beef business is important because the beef cow is a

conservative critter and generally so is her owner. This discussion all started with loosely tied bales– or worse, those pear shaped bales that occasionally get spit out of the big round baler. Of the last 65 loads of hay the center has had shipped in, the average load weighed 39,629 pounds or 19.8 tons. There was 27 bales per load for an average bale weight of 1,467 pounds. The alfalfa grass bales averaged 1,413 pounds, CRP hay bales averaged 1,519 pounds and grass hay 1,363 pounds per bale.

The difference in weight between the heaviest and lightest bale weights was 4,212 pounds per load, over a 2 ton difference in load weights. The end result is an 11 percent increase in transportation costs by hauling the lighter bales (13.9 cents per mile per ton versus 12.5 cents per mile per ton). I don't even want to tell you what hauling 27 bales that only average 1000 pounds per bale costs, but I will anyway. You would haul 7 tons less hay and your transportation costs would increase 47 percent up to 18.5 cents per mile per ton.

I won't tell you the price of those odd shaped pear bales. I know what you're thinking, you don't buy hay. Sorry, but all hay needs to be hauled, and efficiency is the name of the game. Eliminate complacency! Keep a good wrap on your big bales.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0048.

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Impact of Bale Weight on Hay Hauling Costs	1519 lb bale	1363 lb bale	1000 lb bale
Per mile transportation charge	\$2.50	\$2.50	\$2.50
Bales per loaded semi	27	27	27
Total load weight	41,013 lbs	36,801 lbs	27,000 lbs
Cost per mile per ton	.125 ¢	.139 ¢	.185 ¢

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