

Are you storing up trouble?

How to avoid costly feed waste this winter

Poor storage – whether it be for home-grown silages or bought-in feeds – can result in significant levels of wastage and economic losses. No producer can afford either as feed prices continue to rise, so here are some timely tips to help eliminate waste.

Producers should look carefully at feed storage and handling in an attempt to reduce losses that can add up to several thousand pounds per winter. That's the view of Promar regional consultant David Burns.

"Sub-standard feed storage and handling represents an insidious cause of increased feed costs on many farms, but the good news is that it's something that is within producers' control.

"Poor feed storage is a common sight on many dairy units, resulting in raised feed costs and reduced animal performance. And as dairy producers look to incorporate more straights into rations, so the amount of waste, and the economic cost, increases."

Mr Burns calculates that for a 200-cow herd using 2.5 tonnes of concentrates per cow at an average price of £230/tonne a 5% wastage rate will cost £5,750 per year, or £29 per cow.

Clean concrete

He believes that losses start to mount up the moment the feed is delivered. "On many units the bulker tips the load onto a mucky yard before it is pushed into the store. All this does is contaminates the feed.

"Making sure loads are always tipped onto clean concrete helps ensure feed gets into store in good condition."

Kite Consulting nutritionist Tim Davies agrees: "Many producers haven't been able to invest in storage facilities, so many feeds that are bought in are simply tipped onto a concrete standing and covered in plastic.

"This is fine, providing the concrete is

sound and clean and the feed is well sheeted and weighted."

He's seen heavy-weight haulage tarpaulins used with great effect on many units.

"These are ideal as they provide a tough, waterproof and bird proof cover and have a bit of weight to them – I don't like to see old tyres on silage clamps or weighing down plastic sheeting on any feed stuff come to that."

He adds that he still comes across herds where cows have eaten tyre wire and died, despite the warnings. "So any storage method that avoids using tyres – or too many tyres – is great in my book." Mr Davies says that dry feeds are best stored in sheds: "It's all about keeping them dry – if you can do that then they will keep well with minimal waste."

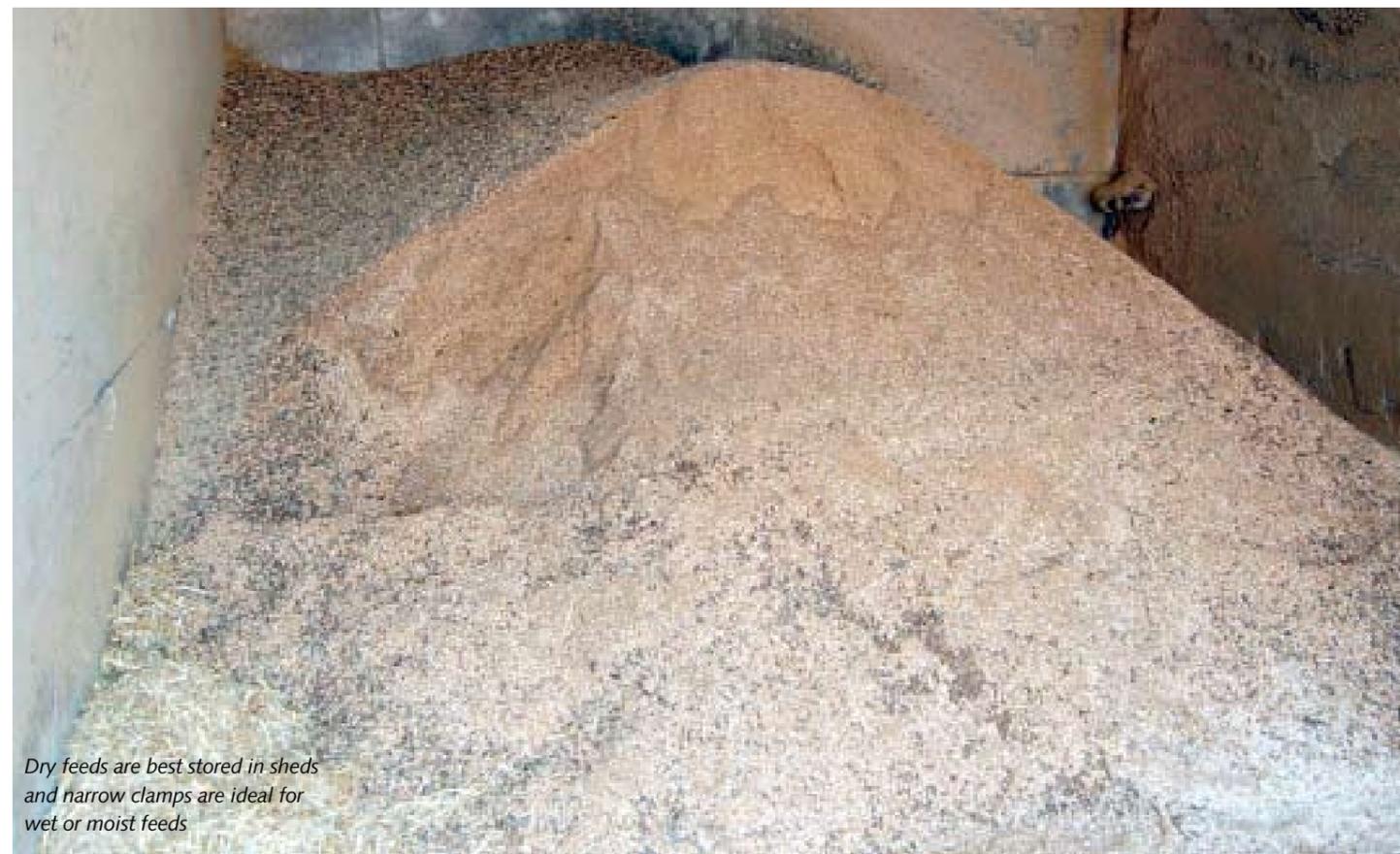
He says that the only exception are feeds with high oil contents, such as biscuit meal, which can be up to 18% oil. "If stored for too long the oil can go rancid. This reduces the palatability of the feed and, therefore, it's feed value. So ideally such feeds should be stored for no more than two months."

As far as moist or wet feeds are concerned, it's all about keeping the air out of them – much like silage. "Consolidate these feeds on arrival to remove as much air as possible, just as you would when filling a silage clamp.

Handling advice

"The ideal place for them is in a narrow clamp, if you've space. If you haven't, or you're just not sure how to store and handle such feeds, then ask for some advice."

Mr Davies says that reputable companies



Dry feeds are best stored in sheds and narrow clamps are ideal for wet or moist feeds

that supply moist feeds, like KW Alternative Feeds, will always provide their customers with good storage advice. "So make the most of that, and if you're still not sure then ask – there's too much at stake if feed spoils. It's waste that few, if any, producers have the luxury to be able to afford."

And he stresses that some producers are still not 'getting it right' with their silage clamps. "Poor sheeting and poor rodent control are perennial problems, as is rolling the sheet back too far and exposing more silage than is required for feeding.

"All result in secondary fermentation and mouldy silage, which are just other ways of saying 'waste'. If producers visualised themselves burning £20 notes every time

they 'over expose' their silage or fail to sheet it properly then I think they'd take more care. As that's exactly what they're doing," adds Mr Davies.

As well as being well sealed, be it from air or moisture or both, feed stores also need to have effective partitions so different materials are stored separately and can not mix while in store.

"If feedstuffs get mixed up the consequence is that more has to be discarded or that the feed ration will differ from the ration developed because ingredients are not added accurately," says David Burns.

Yield reduction

Stores must also be protected from the elements. If feedstuffs are allowed to get

wet they will weigh more with the effect that less dry matter is loaded into the feeder wagon and cows will be underfed. Mr Burns estimates that if ingredients with an 'expected' dry matter of 86% are actually fed at 70% dry matter due to poor storage the impact would be a yield reduction of 0.5 litres per cow per day.

He also points out that losses occur during feed handling and also recommends that steps are taken to prevent these. "Resist the temptation to be too hasty when moving feedstuffs around – you want them to stay in the loader bucket rather than being distributed across the yard.

"Try and make sure the loader is used in areas which are protected from the wind. At £300/tonne, no-one can afford to see



David Burns: "Losses can also occur during feed handling"

Tim Davies: "Reputable feed companies will provide good storage advice"



soya being blown out of the loader bucket!"

Stores should also be protected against vermin. While the physical losses due to rats and mice are well known, Mr Burns believes the real problem is contamination, which can result in disease. In addition to rodents, crows and starlings are a major problem on some units and the latest threat is badgers.

"Defra has produced a DVD showing badgers in feed areas at night. So undoubtedly one of the best ways to reduce the considerable losses and disease risk due to feed being contaminated is to do all you can to keep vermin out of stores and feed areas."

Rachael Porter