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## **Feeding Moldy Hay**

We are still seeing consequences from such a wet summer and difficult haying season. No matter how hard producers tried, hay was likely baled a little too wet and now has some mold.

Can this hay be fed safely to any class of livestock? Direct negative effects of moldy hay are difficult to document. Horses may be more sensitive to mold than most livestock. For instance, mold spores often contribute to respiratory and digestive problems like colic or heaves in horses. Cattle apparently are less affected, but certain types of molds can cause abortions or aspergillosis. People, too, can be affected by mold spores. Mold can cause a condition called farmer's lung, where the fungus actually grows in lung tissue. So try to avoid breathing in many of these spores.

It is a tough decision to feed or avoid using the moldy hay. Although all hay contains some mold, when it becomes easily noticeable, the decision becomes important. Usually, mold makes hay less palatable; resulting in lower intake or even in animals refusing to eat the hay altogether.

Other problems from mold can occur because of mycotoxins produced by certain mold fungi. Mycotoxins can cause a number of problems, depending on the levels that are present in the hay:

- Reduced nutrient absorption and impaired metabolism, including altered digestion and microbial growth, diarrhea, intestinal irritation, reduced production, lower fertility, abortions, lethargy, and increased morbidity
- Alterations in the endocrine and exocrine systems
- Suppression of the immune system, which can lead to other disease problems
- Cellular death causing organ damage

The mycotoxin issues are the main drivers of the decision making process when discussing feeding moldy hay. Not all molds produce mycotoxins and the amount produced by those that do is unpredictable.

The best course of action is to minimize feeding moldy hay to more sensitive animals, like horses or pregnant cows. This may require a keen eye or sensitive nose when selecting hay to feed each day. Mixing moldy hay with other feedstuffs can dilute problems, but be careful that you don't make your animals sick by tricking them into eating bad hay that they would normally not eat.

Moldy hay is a difficult problem to deal with. Common sense and good observation often are your best decision aids.

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