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It's a wrap

Bale wrap a hazard for cattle health

It is fitting that we wrap up the end of the year with a holiday that includes a lot of wrapping paper. Does the wrapping paper at your house get torn off with reckless abandon or carefully removed and saved for later use? Depending on the size of your family you can fill many trash bags full of used wrapping paper. If you have young children or pets around you may be more diligent at making sure all the paper, bows and strings get properly disposed so it doesn't get eaten.

Besides presents, winter brings other items that are wrapped up in nice packages. Round bales of hay, corn stalks or other material will be used throughout the winter to keep cattle well fed and bedded. Although round bales are a convenient way to harvest and store forage, the net wrapping can be a pain when you need to use the bale.

Although you can't save the wrapping to use again, I recommend carefully removing

the wrapping prior to using. Besides getting tangled in everything on the farm, it can cause problems if eaten by cattle. Small pieces fed in a ration after being ground up or larger pieces that get tangled around feed stuff can all be hazardous to cattle. The plastic is not digestible and will hang up in the rumen, eventually forming a ball that can irritate the ruminal lining or cause an obstruction.

Although cows dying from an intestinal obstruction is not an everyday occurrence, it does happen and is preventable. Don't be fooled by "biodegradable" net wrap which breaks down by when exposed to UV light, not by digestion. There has been some work to develop edible bale wrap but it is not commercially available. Cutting and disposing of new wrap may not be fun in the middle of winter but it could save a cow from an untimely death.

One thing we don't know is if net wrap

can cause ruminal irritation that can lead poor digestion or liver abscesses. These cows may leave the herd as poor doers without us ever knowing what the cause was.

Generally, feedlots have not worried about net wrapping, believing that it gets torn into small enough pieces to pass through the rumen. However, there have been a couple of feedlots in Iowa that are associating poor performance with ruminal irritation from net wrapping.

It is not easy, but some way to either remove or capture net wrapping before it gets fed to cattle should be considered. Some companies have developed bale handling equipment that can capture the net wrap as the bale is broken apart. Net wrapping may seem a small matter that would take a lot of effort to remove but careful attention to these small matters will lead to better care and management in the future.

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