

Ask the Vet: Are there any concerns with feeding moldy feedstuffs to livestock?

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Though this past year's weather was quite conducive to producing large yields, it has also led to many concerns in feeding this bumper crop. With the late harvest and the corn staying wet, mold has been reported growing on standing corn. Also molds can grow after harvest in the bin. A lot of hay got rained on last summer, significantly reducing the quality and increasing the incidence of spoilage. Improperly produced silage can also present problems with molds or bacteria such as *Listeria*. We have been dealing with a lot more feed problems affecting livestock this year. So what does this all mean for me?

There are really two separate issues concerning moldy feed. First is an actual infection of the animal with the fungus that has been growing in the feed. This is fairly rare, but is most significant in pregnant animals. Certain species of fungus can grow in the placenta or fetus and cause abortions. We have seen some cases in cows eating moldy ground hay this winter, since grinding the hay led to higher consumption of the mold. The other issue is the consumption of mycotoxins, which are chemicals produced by molds that can cause disease in animals. In some cases the molds may have died off and be long gone, but the toxins remain. Out of the many thousands of different molds that can grow on feed, a couple hundred produce mycotoxins, and only a few are of real concern. Some of the most common include aflatoxin, fumonisins, vomitoxin, and zearalenone. The significance of contamination depends on species (cattle, swine, ect.), stage of production (pregnancy or lactation), amount of mycotoxin ingested, and duration of exposure. Depending on the type of mycotoxin, clinical signs are quite varied, from abortions to weight loss to bleeding disorders to death. Mycotoxins can be passed into the milk of dairy animals and allowances in the bulk tank are typically very low. Dairy producers should be aware of this and consult with their milk buyers with any questions.

So if you notice some mold in the feed you are using, should you be concerned? Well, maybe. Again, only a few molds can cause major problems. Low concentrations usually do not cause problems either. This is the premise of blending damaged feed with good feed, but be aware of USDA rules on blending mycotoxins when selling grain. However, if you are seeing any signs that are not typical in your herd, molds or mycotoxins could be an issue. Feed can be sent to a lab for analysis for common mycotoxins, but sampling can be difficult. Samples from deceased or aborted animals can also be tested. Sometimes the diagnosis is not made by actually finding the toxin, but by analyzing the clinical signs and eliminating other potential causes.

Using good quality feed is important in livestock production, but sometimes you get stuck with some less than optimal ingredients. The main thing is to be aware that there are potential problems. If you are experiencing any issues in your herd, the feed is one place to look for answers.