

News Column  
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For Release 11/11/19  
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## COVERING BUNKER SILOS

It was 32 years ago when Ronnie invited me to his farm to help work cattle on a Saturday morning. I was a young county agent, still a bachelor with no social life, and had nothing else to do on a Saturday, so it sounded like a good offer.

To be clear, the offer was just to work — not to be paid. I knew that going in, not because we discussed it, but because I knew Ronnie well enough to know better than to think there would be money involved.

Why I was assigned to be the guy pushing cows into the chute is still a mystery because Ronnie apparently thought I was an idiot. He put me in the chute, then kept telling me what to do, like he thought I had never seen a cow before. And, I don't mean just a few tips now and then; it was constant. The instructions never stopped!

The facilities were what you might expect on a tightwad farmer's place. Not much. The alley to the chute was about 10 feet long and there was a small catch pen behind the alley. Every cow had to be circled into the alley, then tailed up into the chute.

We were five or six cows in, and I was already tired of the verbal helpfulness. I wanted to tell him to back off, but I bit my tongue instead and just continued to do me job.

Then it happened.

The cow I was pushing crapped all over me. It was on my shirt, down one leg of my jeans, on my shoe, and on both hands. I paused long enough to wipe the biggest mess off my

shirt and to wipe my hands on my jeans, then put that cow in the chute and went back for the next one.

Ronnie paused. Then he said, with a bit of amazement in his voice and somewhat sheepishly, “Oh, you’ve done this before.”

And he stopped giving me instructions.

I tell this story to let you know that some of the things I write about, I have actually experienced. And some things I haven’t. I’ve had my arm up the backside of a cow. I’ve been crapped on, stepped on, run over, and kicked.

On the other hand, I have never tried to put a plastic tarp on a bunker silo on a windy day. I haven’t done it on a calm day either,...but I’m going to tell you to do it anyway, like it is the easiest thing in the world.

Research suggests that dry matter loss in bunker silos that are not properly covered – sealed with plastic weighted down by old tires – exceeds 30% in the top three feet of the pile. In a bunker 12 ft. high by 80 ft. wide by 140 ft. long, the top three feet contains about 672 tons of feed (at a density of 40 pounds/cubic foot).

A 30% loss in the top three feet would equal 201.6 tons. You can figure what it is worth to you, but I’m going to put the number at \$50 per ton, as fed, making the lost tonnage – by not covering the bunker with plastic – worth \$10,080.

Plastic is expensive, but a quick internet search tells me I could purchase the plastic to cover that 80 foot wide by 140 foot long bunker for about 12 cents per square foot. That’s \$1,344 for the plastic.

I get it. There is labor involved too,...and you need a bunch of old tires to weight the plastic down. The tires get water in them and the water turns black and stinky. It is a miserable

job! But why wouldn't you spend \$1,344 to save \$10,000?

Ideally, the tires that will weight down the plastic will be cut in half so they don't hold water. That's another expense, and you'd have to find someone to do it, but I'm betting you can get tires for free. Maybe you can even get the tire place to pay you to take them....

I'm a bit late in hopping on my soap box to convince you to cover your bunker silo because it should be done immediately, once the silage is in the bunker and packed. Next year though, after seeing the math, I'm sure you'll be prepared.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to [gmcclure@ksu.edu](mailto:gmcclure@ksu.edu).

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