Winter Mud Creates Feeding Challenges

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Have you ever taken a mud bath? I don't mean the kind where you sit in a luxurious spa in a tub filled with peat and volcanic ash said to cure all your ailments and give you glowing skin… I mean the kind where you suit up to go feed the cows and your boot sinks down just a little too deep and suddenly, you're in a pile of mud and other muck you'd rather not think about! Muddy conditions are common across the Southeast this time of year, but there are ways to deal with the challenges associated with mud.

Not only does mud create problems around hay-feeding areas, but it also affects cattle performance. Excess mud creates a suction on legs and hooves, making it challenging for animals to walk through to and from the feeding area. Four to 8 inches of mud can decrease intake by 4 to 8% because animals may choose to stand still rather than walk through it. There are a few ways control mud accumulation to mitigate damage in hay-feeding areas and limit negative effects on animal performance:

Short-Term:

1. Identify well-drained areas to feed hay and supplement. Low-lying areas retain water and do not dry out as quickly.
2. Start at the back of a pasture/pen when feeding hay, and throughout the hay-feeding period, move the hay ring closer to the gate. This means less trips all the way across the pasture, reducing wheel traffic across the area.
3. Consider reduced-labor feeding options. Reduced-frequency feeding and bale grazing are ways to reduce daily feeding trips but must be done correctly to ensure that there is no ruminal upset or decreased animal performance.

Long-Term:

4. Consider creating a sacrifice paddock or heavy-use feeding area. Within this hay-feeding area, construct a concrete pad or use stone and geotextile fabric to reinforce the area that gets heavy traffic. While this method may not be able to be implemented in the thick of wet muddy conditions, it is something to consider for future winters.
5. Address equipment and facility challenges as appropriate, such as acquiring 4-wheel drive tractor(s) and hauling and spreading gravel into areas where needed.

While there is no perfect answer to managing muddy conditions, the considerations above can help to make the best of it.