

Other Alternative Bedding Materials?

Rushes – A Bedding Material Of Plenty?

Considering the price of straw and after reading the recent QMS publication, I was reminded of another bedding material a farmer once talked about using... rushes.

Chances are that some of the really dense patches will be in areas of the field inaccessible to machinery but even some younger rush plants can yield 8 round bales an acre!

Mature dry rushes create an alternative bedding material and, at minimum, provide a suitable base layer before straw is applied – improving vertical drainage – and reducing straw requirements.

As frequency of cutting increases, rush vigour reduces, reducing yield to maybe to 4 or 5 bales/acre. But grass content increases, potentially increasing yield assuming livestock are excluded from the field. This type of material can still produce good bedding, which cattle will pick through at leisure.

Either way, if the intention is to bale the rushes, the field or area will need to be treated like hay crop, so exclude livestock (for a hay/bedding mix) or at least for a few days (to create rush bedding material – sacrificing bulk). Tedding will be required to make sure bales are dry and will keep over the winter. Rushes do make the crop more open that consequently dries more quickly than hay – weather permitting.

Wear and tear on machinery is a bit of a problem, especially for the mower and tedder. This can be minimised in part by fairly inexpensive to maintain equipment such as an old drum ('turbo') mower and haybob which still grace many a stackyard.

Seeds Spread?

Rushes are spreading and becoming increasingly dominant even on previously improved pasture. This type of land, however, does provide opportunity to more safely cut and lift the rushes without venturing into the wettest, roughest or stoniest corners.

There is a risk, similar to any weed seeds, that applying manure that includes rushes onto 'clean land' could help their spread. Having said that, many soils that appear to be free from rushes already contain a large number of buried rush seeds, having been distributed by the wind and animals. These seeds lay dormant (but viable) for many years in wait for more favourable conditions. Rushes are encouraged by old ineffective drainage systems (soils becoming colder as a result), less competitive old grasses, declining soil fertility and reducing pH. Avoiding favourable conditions rather than trying to avoid their spread therefore seems more achievable.

But if they have now established maybe there is opportunity. As the year rolls on and rain falls, the land carrying capacity will reduce. If you miss this window maybe a spell of prolonged dry frost in the winter will provide another opportunity?

After speaking to one particular farmer it is also worth noting that the rushes compost in FYM and have caused no particular problems at spreading time.

Bracken – Making Use Of A Troublesome Weed

Is bracken another option? Mature bracken on accessible sites used to be a common bedding material for crofters and hill farms.

Harvesting in September just as it is starting to die back for the winter seems to achieve the highest yield of most easily dried material. Bracken toxins are also at their lowest at this time of year (but avoid bedding for calves).

The principle is similar to that described above for rushes, holding the same problems and benefits – dense bracken with little understory of grass will make more quickly, assuming it is accessible with machinery. This is also the vegetative type that has resulted in the claimable areas for SFP being reduced in size, so making use of otherwise useless ground?

In the right scenario it is another low cost alternative to straw, and it is reportedly more durable and, at least, as adsorbent. The more mature the material the harder or longer it takes to compost, but a year seems to do it.

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