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Silos can be competitive with bags, bunkers

**By Gene Lucht Iowa Farmer Today | Posted: Thursday, July 5, 2012 3:04 pm**

Even though that bag or bunker might be the least-expensive type of silage storage, the silo may qualify as well.

“It really comes down to how you manage it,” explains Richard Muck, an ag engineer with the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service (ARS) dairy forage research center in Madison, Wis.

It’s no secret an upright silo is more expensive to build and, thus, has more up-front costs than a bunker or a silage bag. But, Muck says different types of storage require different types of management.

A silo may require less daily management than a bag or bunker and thus there may be less dry matter storage loss.

That’s an argument Leroy Shefchik has been making for years.

Shefchik, a former head of the International Silo Association, says average dry matter losses tend to be less in silos.

“A tower silo is a little more fool-proof,” he says, explaining gravity helps a tower silo pack itself, and the roof helps reduce exposure to the elements.

That doesn’t mean there is no waste in a tower silo or there is a high level of waste in other types of storage, Muck and Shefchik agree.

But, it does mean other methods of storage may require more constant management.

Muck headed a research project at the ARS where researchers harvested silage off the same fields at the same time and put it into the three types of storage. They followed up with normal management and used the silage at the same times.

That test showed over two years, dry-matter losses in the oxygen-limiting silo were about 4.3 percent while the bag had dry-matter losses of about 11.3 percent, and the bunker lost 16.9 percent.

Oxygen-limiting tower silos consistently showed the lowest level of dry-matter loss, Muck says. Other types of storage can show lower loss totals if aggressively managed, he adds.

But, that means constantly checking for holes in the plastic for bags and patching those holes quickly and properly. It also means properly packing any type of storage.

Muck adds the range of loss was smallest in the tower silo.

Bags showed the widest range of loss percentages because, when managed properly, bags can be a good form of storage. But, if managed poorly they also can show large dry-matter losses.

Shefchik, who ran a silo company for 31 years, says few farmers are putting up new silos today.

But, he says once waste is figured into the equation, silos can be a good investment for a farmer in the right situation.