Are your deadstock piles and disposal costs causing your farm nightmares?

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Halloween will soon arrive, and your livestock mortality pile should not be the scariest thing around. "Greasie, Grumpy, Gopher Guts!!" Is that what you think of when you need to compost live stock mortality? If you are afraid to open the piles and spread them, you may be doing something wrong and need a few tips or adjustments.

When large and small animals die on a farm, a farmer has only a few options for handling their remains. A farmer may choose to use a rendering service to remove deadstock, however this service may be unavailable or cost prohibitive. Farmers may also choose to bury animals that are taken time, equipment and co-operative weather conditions, it also puts the carcass 6 feet closer to groundwater. In some states burial has been limited to specific situations or outlawed altogether. Leaving mortality open to the elements to jeopardize the health of livestock, wildlife and pets can affect farm biosecurity. Flattening the previous options leaves composting. Where done properly, composting mortality greatly reduces pathogens and is relatively odor free. Animals of all sizes can be composted year round at a low cost to the farmer. Nutrient management and CAFO plans require farms to account for the disposal of their dead stock. Proper composting can help meet those requirements in a relatively economical manner.

The Cost of Mortality Disposal

- Mortality Composting - Burying Cow
  - Backhoe operating cost: $84.00
  - Labor: $25.00
  - 0.6 gallons of fuel $3.45 per gallon: $2.07
  - Total Cost: $92.27

- Composting with Wood Chips
  - 5 Cubic Yards Chips @ $85.00 per yard: $425.00
  - Labor: $75.00
  - 0.4 gallons of fuel $3.15 per gallon: $10.60
  - Tractor operating cost: $81.70
  - Total Cost: $561.35

The location for composting mortality should be carefully thought out. The site should have a 2-3 percent slope, be at least 100 ft. from any watercourse, seasonal or non-seasonal, and be convenient. Properly composted carcasses will not have much run-off, but any run-off generated should be directed through a grass filter strip. The plants in the grass filter strip serve to take up nutrients that would otherwise run off. Without a filter strip excess nutrients could cause a pollution problem. Proper Compost Methods:
  - First, make a 24-inch deep layer of bulky absorbent material, such as municipal wood chips, making sure the layer allows for 2 feet of clearance around the carcass and is at least 2 feet deep. Lay the carcass in the center of the pile or windrow, making sure to leave the run-off water to avoid bloating and possible explosions.
  - Second, cover the carcass with 3 feet of wood chips, bedding pack, or old sludge. It is important to use chunky carbon sources; it is material in too fine the process will shut down.

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RIGHT — This graphic shows how a mortality compost pile should be constructed.

Temperatures should range between 130-150 degrees F within 24 hours. Composting large animals typically takes from 4 to 6 months. With the seasonality of the northwest it is best to leave piles for 6 to 12 months as there will be no good pathogen reduction and the material will be further processed. The composting process is the opposite of the silage process: in making silage the air is pressed out of the pile. In composting the more air you incorporate the faster and more complete the process. With the silage process the less air the better. The compost should be left alone until the carcass is fully decomposed: no turning or agitation is needed. The composted material can be reused as the base to compost another carcass or land applied after removing the large bones. Remember to

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keep the composting area neat; no cuts or low areas to collect water. Make sure all animal parts are well covered. This will help keep odors to a minimum and deter scavengers. Composting is fast, easy, environmentally sound, and depends on the circumstances, relatively economical. Rendering is a good option but can cost $3.50-$125 per animal. Pig, horses, and other livestock can cost up to $2,000. Buying a cow, including equipment, labor and feed cost about $700 and will not provide any protection control. Composting costs will vary. If you need to buy a carbon source like wood chips, the cost of composting will be about $5. There are areas that have woodchip shortages but generally you can get woodchips from road crews, utility and cable companies that maintain roads for little or no cost. Free chips bring the cost down to $20 including labor and equipment. Other on-farm curbside sources can be used in the process but it’s best to use tree branches, such as municipal woodchips for the base and chopped cornstalk, bedded pack, feed refusal, old silage or other materials in the layers or as the cover material. Costs for all of these options vary but about $82 and will allow you to lower your costs and choose the best option for your operation.


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