Carcass Management Team Promotes Composting of Dead Animals

Dick Wanner

EAST EARL, Pa. — A busload of professionals with an interest in dead farm animals spent the morning of Aug. 30, in a meeting room at the Shady Maple Smorgasbord, looking at slides of dead cows, chickens, hogs and horses.

Then, they had lunch.

This group had paid scintillating attention to the yuck-factor of the morning’s presentations. They focused instead on the economic, environmental, aesthetic and political impacts of on-farm mortalities, an inevitable life-and-death consequence of farming with animals.

“Where there is livestock, there is death,” has become one of ag’s newest catch phrases.

There was a time when rendering companies would not only pick up dead animals, but also pay for the privilege. But economic factors such as dramatically lower prices for hides forced them to first stop paying for carcasses, and then to charge for picking them up.

That rendered rendering unaffordable for farmers.

Although the ag community bears the loss of the rendering operation, the people who advise farmers have given up beating that dead horse.

There were about 60 of those advisors gathered at Shady Maple to talk about alternatives. The one that stood out was on-farm composting.

In the afternoon, they visited three Lancaster County farms where composting has become the preferred way to deal with mortality.

Most of the people at the daylong workshop hailed from Extension, conservation districts, NRCS, USDA and APHIS, although there were a few farmers in attendance.

Workshop leaders included Pennsylvania Extension educators Craig Williams and Gregory Martin. Also presenting were Jean Bonhotal, director of the Cornell Waste Management Institute, at Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., and Mark Hutchinson, an Extension professor at the University of Maine.

Hutchinson is also a director of the Maine Compost School, the country’s oldest and, by many accounts, the most highly regarded source of composting guidance and training.

Bonhotal, Hutchinson, Martin and Williams make up the Northeast SARE Carcass Management Team.

The USDA’s Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program funds much of the team’s research and outreach.

Bonhotal started the morning’s presentations with a discussion of mortality disposal methods. Burial, digestion, incineration and landfill are all options, but they’re not ideal, she said.

Buried carcasses can pollute groundwater, and if they’re too shallow they can attract scavengers. Incineration is expensive.

Shredding dead animals so they’ll work in a methane digester is a possibility, she said. But a shredder is a capital expense, takes a lot of power to run and a strong stomach to watch.

It’s the rare landfill that will accept dead animals, and the ones that do charge a hefty tipping fee.

Bonhotal said there are businesses that collect dead animals from farmers, but they charge sometimes substantial fees.

That leaves composting, and Bonhotal is a strong advocate of on-farm composting, properly done.

Currently, she favors static, passively aerated piles for individual animals, or windrows for multiple deads.

Turning can speed the composting process, but it requires labor and fuel, and releases odors. A properly constructed and sited pile or windrow draws air from the bottom, providing oxygen for the heat-producing organisms naturally present in the carcass and the high-carbon materials surrounding it.

Air moving through compost can actually create “chimneys” from the bottom of the pile to the top, where outgoing air is rich in carbon dioxide.

A pile in the act of becoming compost — it takes two to six months — quickly heats to 140-160 degrees Fahrenheit, which kills the pathogens in the carcass and the material surrounding it.

Bonhotal and her fellow presenters repeatedly stressed the importance of airflow through the composting material.

Like composting itself, the science of composting is a work in progress. Experiments by farmers and researchers are encouraged and welcomed, no matter what the outcome.

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**Deadline Nears for Winter Wheat, Barley Insurance**

New York farmers have until Sept. 30 to sign up for winter wheat and barley crop insurance. Crop insurance includes prevented planting coverage and provides some additional coverage when weather — wet or dry — delays planting beyond recommended planting dates.

“Crop insurance can provide farmers with an insurance payment that covers their cost of production when the weather is not on their side,” said Tom Cavanagh, NY State Comptroller’s auditor. “The federal crop insurance program is voluntary, and is the best option for farmers who want to protect against drought, flooding or insect damage.”

In 2011, New York state farmers purchased 603 winter wheat policies, insuring 64,801 acres for $14.3 million in coverage. This covered 54 percent of the crop planted last year. For those with coverage, 174 acres due to drought, flooding or insect damage were insured. Planting a cover crop this fall will not adversely impact crop insurance coverage for spring-planted crops, due to the use of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help farmers produce more forage. Check with a crop insurance agent for more information.

Farmers can read the USDA’s new guide on cover crops and crop insurance at www.rma.usda.gov/news/covercrops/drought. In addition, the pasture, hay and forage rainfall index crop insurance enrollment date has been changed to Nov. 15 for the 2013 growing season. This crop insurance provides coverage against drought only, but it is a simplified program that compares historical average rainfall to the rainfall for the past few months insured by the producer. Crop insurance can only be purchased from a licensed crop insurance agent. USDA provides a listing of all crop insurance agents doing business in New York state on its website at www.rma.usda.gov. A print copy is available by calling the New York Department of Agriculture and Markets at 1-800-554-4501.

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