Natural Rendering: A Natural Solution For Mortality and Butcher Waste

By Jean Bonhotal

Are you paying double for disposal of animal carcasses? First you have the economic loss of the animal, then you must pay the renderer up to $70 for a cow, $60 for a pig, and $200 for a horse! On-site composting of mortalities and butcher waste has emerged as a money-saving, environmentally sound alternative for many farm businesses.

The rendering industry has been providing the valuable service of mortality pickup from farms and residuals from many butchers for as long as we can remember. But recent declines in the prices of hides, tallow, meat and bone meal, byproducts have hurt the rendering industry economically. Where at one time these products were paid for, the rendering industry has been forced to charge for service. The rising prices of rendering services have made it unaffordable for many farms and butchers.

In an anonymous survey we found improper disposal methods to be common. Allowing carcasses to decay above ground (and be scavenged by wild animals), or burial (which is difficult at certain times of year,) can potentially contaminate surface and groundwater. These practices can also pose biosecurity threats to livestock.

Composting of livestock mortality and butcher residuals is a convenient, biosecure, socially acceptable and environmentally responsible method of disposal. In addition, parts and animals not normally accepted by rendering services can be composted.

KEY POINTS ABOUT CARCASS COMPOSTING:

- Select a site that is well-drained, and at least 200 feet from water courses, sinks, seasonal seeps or other landscape features that indicate the area is hydrologically sensitive.
- Lay a 2-foot deep bed of bulky, absorbing organic material containing some sizeable pieces (4-6 inches long).
- Utility and municipal wood chips work well.

Two years ago I started a firewood business, called Stone Gully Firewood, when my landlord logged a section of his 200 acres of Sugar Maple, which left hardwood tops in the woods. That first year I used a pickup truck, a crawler, a chainsaw, and a splitting maul. A classified ad in a Buffalo newspaper sold 50 cords the first year.

Since then, I have made arrangements with woodlot owners to cut their hardwood tops after the logger is done. My work keeps the woods clean and gives the owner a little extra money. I also have an arrangement with a nearby sawmill that sells me their culled logs. While the culls aren't good for furniture, they are great for firewood. I cut them at the sawmill to avoid transportation costs and I keep their log yard clean.

Equipment requirements can vary quite a bit. At the sawmill, I can drive right up with a two-wheel drive pickup. In the woodlot, it may be necessary to have a 4x4 truck or a tractor. Sometimes you will have to leave useable wood in the forest because it is too difficult to harvest.

There was a time when I bought tractors and equipment because I thought it would speed up production. In the end, those pieces of equipment were capital expenses that eventually broke, which took time and money to fix. A good rule is to keep it simple. I have found that the less equipment I own the more firewood I produce. A good, all-purpose tool would be a 4x4 pickup that can get around the woods easily, can haul the wood, and can deliver it to customers.

I prefer to use a splitting maul instead of a hydraulic splitter. I get a backache lifting the big wood onto the splitter. I move the splitter around, but often that is more work than moving the wood to the splitter.

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