

Safety at Silage in Wet Weather

John McNamara, Safety Specialist, Teagasc, Kildalton

Calm organisation will be required to make silage in safety when the weather picks up. Rushing in adverse conditions is a major cause of accidents. Remember, a serious accident could leave scars lasting longer than the present weather crisis. A lot of co-operation will be required between contractors and farmer clients to get the job done.

Machinery Operation

- All operators require a high level of competence. Wet slippery conditions certainly are not suitable for inexperienced operators. Teenagers should be at least 16 years old and receive proper instruction before they drive tractors during silage making.
- Blockages and breakdowns are far more likely with heavy wet crops, which are flattened and stemmy. Practices like turning off the PTO and stopping the engine are crucial.
- Use adequate equipment to prevent accidents when repairing equipment. For example support equipment when changing a tyre.
- Overturning on steep slopes is a major cause of accidents in wet weather. The weight of water in grass increases the load and raises the centre of gravity. Often the weight of the trailer causes the tractor to overturn so trailer loads should be kept within safe limits. On sloping ground options to improve safety includes the use of: use of side mounted equipment, dual wheels, four wheel drive systems and trailer braking.
- Make sure that trailer hitches are wear free. Again, the weight of wet grass could cause a trailer to turn over backwards. There should be no space between the hitch hook and the metal retainer of the trailer to allow the trailer to come free.
- When a tractor gets stuck extra precautions are required. Hitch the towrope below the axle and tow out rearwards. Never 'slip the clutch' as this could cause a tractor to overturn.

Children

Children should be well supervised at all times when silage making is in progress. The farmyard should be a 'no go area'.

Facilities

- Yards should be free of obstructions to allow the free flow of equipment. Well-maintained roadways allow machinery to travel safely at reasonable speeds.
- As industrial loaders put enormous pressure on silage pit walls especially with wet grass. These should be checked in advance for soundness. Sighting rails fitted to walls as these indicate the location of the wall the loader driver.
- The slope at the sides of the clamp should be 45 degrees maximum. With heavy wet grass a pit holds less. Is there any other suitable area available to make a clamp?

Applying Acid Additives

- As manhandling 205 litre barrels of acid is extremely dangerous an efficient mechanical or pump system should be used.
- Wear suitable protective equipment when handling acid including a face shield and acid resistant gloves.

Effluent

- Silage produces 7000litres of effluent per acre in wet conditions. This must be diverted and stored. Keep manhole covers and fencing in place to prevent drowning. This is especially important for child safety.
- Adding effluent to slurry increases the output of deadly hydrogen sulphide so good ventilation is required when agitating or moving slurry.

Safety of the Public

- Good visibility is necessary at access points to public roadways. Warning signs and bollards should be used on road verges. It is not permitted to put them on the metalled road surface.
- Public roadways should be kept free of hazardous materials. This is crucial in wet weather to prevent dangerous road accidents

As mentioned at the start, a calm approach is required. Contractors conduct ninety percent of silage making. Generally very good equipment is available.

In any event, the quality of silage has already declined so an extra day or two of a wait won't make much difference at this stage.

Doing a 'Grass Cover' and estimating feed available to make up for the deficit in regrowth should be prioritised at this stage. Contact Teagasc for further information.