



Animal & Plant Health Agency

Information Note

Increased risk of straw bedding shortages this winter in the UK

October 2024 (revised from September 2020)

This information note has been updated in response to concerns about straw shortages developing and, a potential increase in straw prices across the country in autumn and winter 2024. The wet weather in late summer and early autumn has affected straw yields and has increased the risk of bedding and feed spoilage.

Where straw is in short supply, prices are likely to rise, and animals that are housed may be affected if there is a shortage of good quality bedding. These factors could force some farmers to cut back the amount of straw used for bedding and environmental enrichment on farms. A reduced amount of bedding increases the amount of faecal contamination of housed animals. This will increase the risk of diseases such as mastitis, especially in dairy cows, and alimentary disease resulting in diarrhoea in all ages of livestock, but the highest risk will be in neonatal and young animals. An increased risk of opportunist infection of the reproductive tract in animals giving birth is also associated with dirty bedding. Reduced or inappropriate bedding can also adversely affect the management of respiratory disease. Using less bedding will result in dirtier animals which can affect their suitability for presentation at abattoirs. A lack of or insufficient enrichment has the potential to lead to welfare problems, which include tail biting in pigs.

Farmers may seek to find alternative types of bedding such as wastepaper, or recycled wood shavings, but these can also be associated with difficulties, and present different management challenges. The management of animals when housed may have to be adapted to a different bedding type. The use of certain bedding materials is not advisable, and in the case of gypsum, is illegal. Please see the AHDB links below for guidance on appropriate bedding materials as well as alternative enrichment material.

Feeding insufficient forage of reasonable quality, or poorer quality forage, can result in increased risk of certain metabolic and infectious diseases, and lower resistance to parasitic and other infections.

Alternative bedding materials

There is useful guidance on alternative bedding materials and issues on these links.

- [AHDB Dairy - bedding materials](#)
- [AHDB Beef and Lamb – Bedding materials directory](#)
- [AHDB Pork - Alternative bedding for pigs](#)
- [AHDB Pork - Environmental enrichment for pigs](#)
- [AHDB – Making best use of limited straw](#)
- HCC – [Alternative livestock bedding](#)

Whatever bedding is used, it should be dry and free of visible mould. It is important that farmers and animal-keepers discuss their choice of alternative bedding with their veterinary surgeon so that animal health issues can be considered, for example:

- Wood shavings, chips or sawdust from recycled wood waste should not have been produced from painted or preservative-treated wood. The Environment Agency (EA) has produced [guidance](#).
- Animal By Product (ABP)-derived compost and ABP-derived anaerobic digestate are not permitted to be used as a bedding material. Compost and digestate have not reached an endpoint under ABP rules, and thus bedding is not a permitted disposal method. At present it is not known whether the treatment methods may encourage growth or sporulation of certain pathogens, with the potential for adverse consequences.
- There are disease risks associated with re-using litter or bedding from other livestock; these can have a high microbial load and present a risk of introduction and spread of bacterial pathogens such as *Salmonella* species, and may at times also contain veterinary products such as antimicrobials with the potential to cause issues with residues. The use of poultry litter for other species is illegal as it presents other risks, in particular, botulism outbreaks.
- Legal bedding alternatives may have potential issues to consider, such as the issues posed by the backing paper used on plasterboard.

- Toxic plants should be avoided as bedding. Although bracken is sometimes used, it can result in toxicity.
- Novel materials, such as coconut and hemp have been used, but digestive problems can arise if animals ingest quantities of the bedding.

An awareness of these issues, as well as an understanding the appropriateness of alternative bedding materials for each species and age group of farm animal, is important among veterinary surgeons, in order to advise their clients of suitable strategies to enact in response to shortages. Advice may also need to be sought from the livestock industry levy bodies, and specific advice on feed and nutrition from specialists. Charities may need to be approached if farmers find themselves facing hardship.

Further information

Contact the [Defra Rural Services](#)

APHA, SRUC-VS and AFBI veterinary laboratory networks in the UK:

- [Vets: contact APHA to get expert advice on unusual animal disease - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- [Contact us | SRUC](#)
- [Animal Disease Diagnostic Services | Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute](#)
- [Farming Community Network - Farming Community Network](#)



© Crown copyright 2024

You may re-use this information (excluding logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v.3. To view this licence visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/ or email PSI@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to APHA Surveillance Intelligence Unit SIU@apha.gov.uk