



Animal & Plant Health Agency

Information Note

Straw bedding shortage this winter in the UK

January 2018 (revised September 2020)

This information note has been updated in response to concerns about straw shortages developing and straw price rises across the country in autumn 2020. The wet winter, followed by the prolonged dry spring and August heatwave, has affected straw yields. The information below remains valid; links to useful information have been added and updated.

The NFU has relaunched its Fodder Bank to help members find animal feed or bedding for their farms, or sell any surplus: <https://www.nfuonline.com/about-us/our-offices/east-anglia/east-anglia-news/nfu-fodder-bank-relaunches-to-support-farmers/>

In December 2017, APHA issued an information note on potential livestock forage shortages in parts of the UK. It raised awareness about possible health, welfare and production problems in ruminants that may arise associated with feeding insufficient forage of reasonable quality, or poorer quality forage. The increased risk of certain metabolic and infectious diseases and lower resistance to parasitic and other infections for animals on a lower plane of nutrition were highlighted. [Read the full document.](#)

The information note also mentioned the associated shortage of straw bedding:

“Where straw is in short supply prices are likely to rise and other species may be affected if there is a shortage of good quality bedding, including pigs and horses. These factors could force some farmers to cut back the amount of straw used for bedding on farms. A reduced amount of bedding increases the amount of faecal contamination of housed animals. This will raise 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 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. Farmers may seek to find alternative

types of bedding such as waste paper, or recycled wood shavings, but these can also be associated with difficulties, and present different management challenges.”

Alternative bedding materials

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

- [AHDB Dairy - bedding materials](#)
- [AHDB Dairy - recycled manure solids](#)
- [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 as at present it is not known whether the treatment methods may actually encourage growth or sporulation of certain pathogens with 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. Re-use of poultry litter can also present other risks, for example, botulism outbreaks
- 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.

Veterinary surgeons need to be aware of these issues so they can best advise their clients. 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, SAC-CVS and AFBI veterinary laboratory networks in the UK:

- [APHA in England & Wales](#)
- [SAC-CVS in Scotland](#)
- [AFBI in Northern Ireland](#)



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

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Date of revision	Revision
February 2018	This information note on bedding shortage has been revised to remove reference to use of paper ash as a bedding conditioner (similar to liming) as this use has not been approved by the Environment Agency.
September 2020	This information note was revised to update links and add a new introductory paragraph.