

Rising Price Of Poultry Litter Costs Cattle Operations

BENTONVILLE, ARK.

The escalating price of fuel, fertilizer, equipment, feed, hay and seed has caused forage and livestock producers to refigure every financial angle in hopes of finding one that will work. Even the price of chicken litter, the once proud member of the dynamic “fescue-litter” duo that fueled northwest Arkansas’ first economic engine, is on the rise.

In compliance with Arkansas regulations, poultry growers are encouraged, with some economic assistance, to contract litter for shipment out of nutrient-sensitive watershed areas. Local producers with acreage that still qualifies for litter application, based on nutrient management guidelines, find that litter to be impossible to find, or priced beyond an assumed value as fertilizer.

Valuable, indeed! Litter was the waste product that originally turned rocky sagegrass fields into the most productive forage land in the United States. Even today, when its fertilizer value is compared to commercial nitrogen-phosphorus-potassium sources, the going price for litter can still be viewed as a bargain.

The nutrient analysis of broiler litter samples, submitted by Benton County poultry producers since 2004, shows an average concentration of 67-60-60 lbs of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium per ton. Based on current prices for commercial fertilizer, one ton of average broiler litter is worth \$105. The average fertilizer value of hen litter is worth \$95, while turkey litter is valued at \$108 per ton.

Significant acreage in northwest Arkansas, based on soil sample results, requires no further phosphorus. That suggests that we can discount its value, as there is no use paying for what you don’t need. That still leaves these

three litter sources with an N-K value of \$75, \$60 and \$73 per ton, respectively. Not too bad when the going price for litter is around \$35 per ton, if you can find it.

Each year I suggest to Master Gardener trainees that poultry litter was the original miracle growing agent. Otherwise, how were farmers of six decades ago able to grow fescue on top of these rocks? A closer look at a litter analysis will reveal, in addition to nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, small amounts of calcium, magnesium, sulfur, iron, zinc, boron and copper. Not to mention that most of litter’s bulk is organic matter, a real miracle worker.

If forage producers can’t obtain litter, why direct attention to its fertilizer value? At this point, I’m not sure how many producers can’t obtain it, or simply aren’t trying after finding they can’t get it for \$10-\$12/ton, which was a standard price for years. Also, producers who contract litter to move out of the area may be more attentive to local needs if the local price was more equitable.

Currently, poultry producers are the primary individuals submitting samples, but then not on all batches or sources. Should potential buyers be sampling litter? Results indicate an enthusiastic “yes,” as we show a range of 100-500 percent difference in the nitrogen-potassium value between batches of litter. You could end up with litter worth only \$16 per ton, or be lucky and purchase litter that has a nitrogen-potassium fertilizer value of \$105 per ton.

Today, the recurrence of sagegrass across northwest Arkansas indicates that litter applications are sorely missed, as forage stands thin and livestock carrying capacity continues to decline. Δ



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