A Third Generation Farmer Focuses on High Quality Hay

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Larry Olsen and his family are hay producers from Mitchell, SD. Olsen and his family have been operating their small forage business, aptly called Olsen Family Hay Production, since 2003. Their primary focus is on the production of alfalfa and alfalfa-grass mixtures for sale to dairy producers and horse owners. Larry manages about 500 acres on his family farm, as well as additional acres he rents to support the needs of his customers. Using a dry-land production system, he has been able to attain an average yield of 4.5 tons/ac through good harvest management and timing of fertilizer application. Additionally, Olsen's production is used for a cash crop.

Olsen does not use common commercial fertilizers. Instead he uses high grade calcium, a high grade phosphorus, sugar, and fish fertilizer to grow a healthier crop for better insect and disease tolerance for minimal pesticide use. They tend to use it on any standing crop. According to Larry, he applies fertilizer in the fall after haying the last crop before winter. The benefit is to enhance crop health for the next growing season. Larry also mentions that one of the key ingredients of his fertilizer mix is sugar, which he uses in his fertility application after each cutting.

Olsen prefers to store his dry bales in a shed. Following the wet and rainy years of 2009-2011 in parts of eastern South Dakota, Olsen noticed a great deal of rain damage in his hay. He began researching methods to prevent this type of damage. Learning from fellow forage producers in northwest Iowa and northern Illinois, Larry adopted a relatively new concept for this part of South Dakota - individually wrapped baleage. While he had seen this type of practice, it wasn't until 2012 that he incorporated it into his own farming operation. Making high moisture baleage (30%-50%) eliminates nearly all chances of weather damage. Due to the natural fermentation process, increased quality and palatability is achieved as well. Olsen also uses a good quality live bacteria inoculant on every bale. Olsen believes "if you want to make premium quality baleage, extra care is needed during every step of the process." In general, alfalfa baleage can have higher energy values when compared to dry hay.

For alfalfa, Olsen takes three cuttings during the growing season and, while tempting, usually avoids a fourth cutting due to the risks involved. However, he will take a fourth cutting if weather permits and moisture levels are adequate. Taking the fourth cutting at the end of the season or even into the middle of October leads to greater risk of frost damage to the plant due to lack of insulation at the surface level. Additionally, the fourth cutting contributes to a depreciation of carbohydrates being stored in the root system. This can very easily lead to severe losses in forage production the following season due to poor plant health. This year, South Dakota has experienced colder than normal temperatures coupled with a lack of "normal" snowfall which can lead to a major winterkill concern. Interestingly, based on his experience and location, Larry points out that the main danger occurs during the spring and is not a consequence of lack of snow-cover. Rather, he points out, the big danger is the ice and freezing rain which tend to occur in March as the soil starts to thaw which can lead to winterkill by damaging the plants starting to break dormancy. (Producers should keep an eye on their production acres to evaluate how winterkill may have affected them.)

Olsen likes to work with small family farms and dairy producers. He advertises in regional newspapers and dairy magazines as well as a variety of farm marketing websites. In the last several years, he has teamed up with Kim Muntefering of K&S Hay & Transport to ship his dry hay production. Kim had been one of Larry's customers in the past. Now, they work together to meet both their customers' hay, straw, and transport needs.

Larry is a member of MFA and has seen extraordinary value in his membership. He joined in 2013 and has seen a huge amount of improvement in his techniques in just that short time. The information and guidance that MFA provides is of extremely high value to forage producers. "The things that you learn should be integrated as best as can be into your operation to help improve its overall performance," said Olsen. Larry, a third generation producer along with a younger brother who manages a cow/calf operation on the farm, continually seek to enhance their knowledge of forage production through their involvement with MFA in order to continue operating a successful family business.