Feed Quality is Key for This Iowa Haymaker

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After working as a farmhand through college, Larchwood, Iowa hay producer Dan Funke knew he wanted to farm for himself someday. He began farming in 1991 and, since he always favored the hay harvest, purchased his first round baler a few years later. His initial plan was to offset what seemed like an insurmountable debt on the round baler by doing additional custom work. Demand for custom haying was excellent, and while harvesting corn stover was a new concept, it quickly exploded and required an additional baler and supporting equipment to meet demand. He focuses on harvesting high quality alfalfa and alfalfa/grass blends. He also maintains a herd of 120 beef cows.

Dan farms 800 acres of clay loam soils that are supplemented with manure applications from dairies and feedlots. He grows corn only when it is necessary to terminate a stand of alfalfa and usually goes back to alfalfa after two years of corn.

Dan plants most of his new stands in the spring. Some will be direct seeded with a brillion seeder or no-till drill, and will always be Roundup Ready®. Dan often uses a nurse crop when starting a new field (e.g., oats/peas, barley/peas, occasionally Italian ryegrass) for weed suppression, erosion control, and better first harvest tonnage. He generally plants ~20 lbs/ac, but has achieved excellent stands as low as 14 lbs/ac.

Special attention is paid to preparing the seedbed, including primary tillage, one or more passes with a McFarlane harrow, a quick trip with the land roller. He drills the seed in and follows up with at least one pass of the land roller. Fields will be smooth, firm, and level when it's time to harvest, and Dan hopes they stay that way for the duration of the stand.

Dan's harvest methods have evolved. To expand markets, he added a 3x4 large square baler in 2005. While it provided a means to a fast, efficient harvest, and improved storage and trucking over round bales, it had its own set of challenges. In northwest Iowa's variable climate, getting hay cured properly to be safely harvested in a big square was extremely difficult. Dan read about wrapping online and dabbled with inline wrapping in 2009. Results were dismal at best, but individual wrapping looked more promising. By late 2010, he had his first single bale wrapper up and running. It was a slow stationary model but the concept worked. Dan was able to harvest at any moisture level from dry hay to 65% with good results. While wrapping adds to harvest costs, he feels it is offset by the increase in quality and quantity.

Since he can bale at higher moisture levels, it isn't necessary to wait for hay to dry down to levels where harvest losses become a serious problem. Additional value is added in the ability to minimize weather risk, expand the daily harvest window, and provide a storage solution immediately behind the baler as each bale gets wrapped.

Dan generally takes five cuttings per year. He gears everything toward making dairy-quality feed fast. He operates a Krone Big M2 for fast cutting and rapid dry down, an Oxbo merger for gathering the hay back into windrows as fast and cleanly as possible, and a new Krone HDP1290 x-cut high density baler and wrapper. Last year Dan and his crew cut about 6,000 acres and baled and wrapped nearly 15,000 bales.

The majority of feed is sold to dairies within 75 miles, although some has been shipped to a goat milker 300 miles away. Dan tries to maximize tonnage and quality and aims for 180-200 RFV. The wrappers have made that goal more attainable.

Dan's business is not without its challenges. Since added moisture adds to freight cost, he has an end user in mind when harvesting fields to minimize freight costs. Another challenge is maintaining the integrity of the bale seal. "In order for this to be successful, it is imperative that enough high quality wrap be applied to each bale. Anything less is a recipe for disaster." Extra care in handling is helpful as well and requires special equipment to do so. There weren't any bale squeezes that could handle the 2,000 lb bales he makes two at a time, so he built his own. He now has 27 custom built hydraulic bale squeezes in seven states.

Dan's biggest management difficulty is the constant juggle between custom work and getting his own hay harvested. He added, "Keeping people and machinery moving in all the right places and times can be a real zoo. The only time it stops between the first cut and the last bale of the season is when it rains. I have a great mix of full and part time help from high schoolers to older guys, and my daughters who do a great job keeping meals in front of us. I would eventually like to scale back on custom services and focus on our own forage."

The best advice Dan has is to stay informed, "Resources that can help improve your business are everywhere." Dan values his MFA membership and feels it provides him with a tremendous boost in his ability to harvest information and share it with others. "Meeting other producers from all over and having the opportunity to influence policy affecting our industry has been the highlight of my career thus far."