

Finding Enough Good Hay

In a previous article I wrote of my plan to buy extra hay to build a hay reserve against drought. So far that has not worked out. Maybe I am better off, haywise, because I intended to build a surplus, but I certainly do not have that surplus.

My basic situation and the resulting scheme were as follows.

I do not make hay. All our land is grazed. I quit making hay in the summer of 1972. I was stuck behind my desk at work every good haying day that summer. It rained whenever I was home. The frustration was too great. I sold my baler, rake and mower and vowed to buy hay from that time on.

Actually, there are plenty of financial studies all indicating that unless you make a terrific amount of hay and do that well, you are better off buying it.

I have been buying 250 round bales each summer for a number of years. Our bison herd is the biggest consumer of that hay. The horse herd is second and the few beef animals we winter are third.

Lately 250 bales is not enough. It should be, but every year seems to have its problems

“Not enough” means that I find myself searching for more hay toward the end of the hay feeding season.

Late winter and early spring are generally poor times to be buying hay.

To remedy that, I decided to buy 350 each year until I have a surplus of between 150 and 200 bales.

That would not be a big buffer, but a surplus of any size would be good. A reserve would take the pressure off when spring grazing comes late or when summer drought causes the fall feeding season to start early.

Well, that seemed like a decent plan.

It is often good to have a plan, but in the real world of farming, things seldom work out as planned. My neighbor who normally supplies our hay was able to provide only 200 bales. The price varied but was around \$100 per ton. Last summer was dry in central Minnesota. About 1/3 of that hay was over-mature canary grass. The animals will eat it but they do not relish it. They do not thrive on it if fed for too long. Hay from Northern Minnesota was my next alternative. Unfortunately, much of that was also of poor quality. The medium quality or better Minnesota hay that I did locate was priced near \$200 per ton.



By this point, I was using the internet and Craig's List. If you are not familiar with Craig's List, perhaps you should be. A buyer must be wary but I find it is the best source for everything from pick-up trucks and tractors to hog feeders and horse drawn mowers.

I responded to an ad for hay with a RFV over 100, delivered by semi-load to central Minnesota for \$175 a ton.

The best judges of forage are the animals. However, before the animals can eat it you have to buy some. Before you buy some, especially over the internet, you ought to communicate in some common terms. The old standard measure of hay is TDN, Total Digestible Nutrients. TDN is certainly helpful, but I have seen hay with an adequate TDN that did not satisfy the animals.

Crude protein is a common measure, but my herds really do not need high protein.

A more commonly used measure of forage in RFV, Relative Feed Value. RFV takes into account digestibility and what I believe to be the most important factor DMI, Dry Matter Intake.

DMI relates directly to "Do the animals like it and will they eat it?"

The ad stated the hay was mostly crested wheat grass but contained some alfalfa. This hay was from northern Montana. Crested wheat grass and alfalfa are a common combination there. Just like here, however, alfalfa winter kills over time. Frankly, I did not care if there was alfalfa or not. Good thing too, because there is extremely little alfalfa.

Buying a semi load of hay you have never seen from people you have never met has some risks. In addition to the normal business fraud concerns worrying about imported hay is not without foundation. I bought a load of rebaled hay from Dakota during a drought in 1976. The hay looked fine. Three of my 15 cows were dead in a week. I suspect some exotic mold but we were never able to nail down the cause. In those years before big balers, dealers would bale stacks of loose Dakota hay so it could be loaded and hauled.

After a certain amount of communication, I agreed to buy a load. Delivered for \$167 per ton. A load is 22 tons,

This is the internet age. The guy selling this hay has never seen it. In fact he is in central Kentucky and has never been to Montana. He is a nice fellow but I am not sure if he knows crested wheat grass from pineapples. I have no idea who the farmer selling the hay is. The trucker turned out to be from Missouri. He was headed home after delivering a load of railroad ties to western North Dakota.

The trucker was located by the Kentucky broker via internet.

The hay was cut young and well made. It has a nice green color and a fine texture.

I am not sure I have ever seen bovines, beef or bison consume forage with more gusto. The beef animals loaded up so that their bellies were above their spines. I was a little worried that they were over doing it. Three weeks later, they are still eating it like candy and doing grand.

I have ordered two more loads.

I will mix that with my not so good local hay and make it to spring just fine.

I hope you have or can locate all the good forage you need.

Best regards.

Tom Barthel, Secretary and Director at Large.