

Supplying Alfalfa Hay and Straw Since 1949

by Dwain Meyer, North Dakota State University

The 6000 acre Tower View Farms in east central North Dakota (near Clifford) has been in the hay business for 55 years. Wayne Volla and his brother Merlin began growing alfalfa as an alternative to the small grains, primarily wheat, produced in the area. The high-quality small-square baled hay was sold as a cash crop, primarily to dairies in western Minnesota. Cull hay they preferred not to sell to customers was used in Merlin's steer backgrounding program.

Today, Tower View Farms is operated by Wayne and his son Steve. They grow primarily soybean (including seed contracts), wheat, and alfalfa hay; occasionally dry edible beans are included. They typically have 500-600 acres of alfalfa with as much as 1000 acres. In 2005, they have just over 400 due to winterkill.

Wayne is quick to point out that they could not handle the operation without excellent long-term employees. Two have been with them for more than 23 years. Wayne credits the hay business with helping to maintain and afford year-around employees.

This year with less acreage, most of the high-quality hay will be purchased by a large dairy in Minnesota, a repeat customer for nearly 30 years. Wayne says, "I just about know where every bale is headed before it's baled. Marketing was more of a problem when we had greater acreage. Marketing is easier when you are a reliable producer and are willing to tell it the way it is. Every lot of hay is sampled and quality determined. If it's junk, I call it junk."

"Getting high-quality hay has been a challenge the past several years due to higher-than-average rainfall and unpredictable weather," says Wayne. We've sold a lot of "cheap" hay to local beef cow producers because it didn't meet our standards for our long-term customers.

Besides the weather, establishing a good stand is considered by Steve to be the most challenging production problem. New stands are established every 4-5 years. Fields to be established are soil tested and P and K preplant incorporated, the only nutrients generally needed. Alfalfa is spring seeded at 10-12 lb/acre with a Great Plains double-disc-opener drill equipped with a grass seed attachment and depth bands. Weed control is obtained with preplant incorporated Eptam or Treflan. Steve is interested in trying a modified no-till system to aid in establishment. The seedbed is prepared in the fall, then seeded in the spring without tillage. This provides a good firm seedbed, keeps soil moisture close to the surface, and allows an earlier seeding to obtain two harvests in the seeding year.

Hay is cut utilizing two New Holland 1431 Discbines. Unless weather interferes, they try to cut the first harvest at mid bud and the second and third cuts at early to mid flowering. "We find that the hay tests above 150 RFV even when well bloomed in the late harvests," says Wayne. Asked if he takes a fall harvest, Wayne said, "We cut everything that has at least a 0.5 ton/ac yield, there's too much value to let it stand. Yes, we've experienced winter kill, but we also had winterkill on stands not cut in the fall."

The hay is baled with a Heston 4760 (4x3x8). Dry hay is the goal, but a preservative (propionic acid-based product) is added automatically if the on-board moisture monitor dictates. "These large square bales require drier hay than the small squares," comments Wayne. All bales are stacked and covered with tarps as soon as possible to protect hay quality prior to their delivery.

Wayne likes new ideas. He is testing a field of HybriForce-400. He likes the fine stem, but still isn't convinced yield is greater than non hybrid alfalfas. He also applied Max-In, a foliar-applied micronutrient, on a field this year. He didn't see a yield increase over a check strip, but hopes forage quality is improved. He would also like to try a tile drainage system to reduce the high water table to see its effect on alfalfa and other crop production.

Wayne hopes that someday his grandson, Austin, will join the operation. He is presently a student at NDSU and has five summers of experience in the hay business.