

A Good Home for Every Hay

Dedication to Top-Notch Service Brings Satisfaction and Success to this Southeast Minnesota Farming Family as well as Those Around Them

by Paul Peterson, University of Minnesota

"I don't want to sell you hay just once." Ron Pagel's hay clients know these aren't just words. In fact, anyone knowing Ron sees this commitment to service goes well beyond his hay business, to his community and agricultural interests across the region.

Paclear Farm comprises about 300 acres near Eyota, not too far from Rochester, in the rolling hills of southeastern Minnesota. Together with his wife Lori, sons Jeff and Tim, and his dad, Ron operates this forage-based farm which his dad bought in 1961. Ron has two brothers who help as needed. Alfalfa, alfalfa-grass mixes, and corn silage rule the acreage; providing the forage base for 50 Holstein cows, their bull calves and replacement heifers, and about 50 Angus-based beef cows and their calves, with plenty of additional hay to market to other dairy and beef operators and horse owners. Ron generally rotates 1 year of corn silage with 3-4 years of alfalfa.

Ron has a passion for forages, the livestock that consume them, and its importance to our future. He has been an active member of the Southeast Minnesota Forage Council, an affiliate of the Midwest Forage Association. He feels strongly that education and legislative activity are key to ensuring that perennial forages stay on the map, not just for their high-quality livestock feed, but for their essential role in soil conservation. Let's take a closer look at his operation.

Anchored by alfalfa. Ron is partial to straight alfalfa hay, but he grows some alfalfa-grass mixtures and sees that increasing in the future. About 80% of the alfalfa acreage ends up in hay, with the balance of the alfalfa put up as inoculated haylage. He has had establishment success using both spring seeding with an oat nurse crop, and "fall" seeding – usually the first week of August. The oat nurse crop is usually chopped for forage, but oat mulch systems have been successful, too, burning down the oats with Poast. He has also spring-seeded oats for grain and straw, followed by an August-seeded alfalfa. He likes seeding with a Brillion, targeting 15-18 lb/ac with solo seedings. For alfalfa-grass mixes, he will back off the alfalfa rate a bit and include 3-4 lb of smooth brome grass, timothy, or tall fescue.

Ron takes variety selection very seriously and is constantly experimenting. He rarely uses just one alfalfa variety in his new seedings. He uses variety trial results, contacts in the alfalfa breeding industry, and performance on his farm to guide his variety selection decisions.



A serious car accident did not phase Pagel's commitment to service.



The Pagel's horse clients are guaranteed they will get the hay they want.

He keeps a close watch on insects, especially potato leafhopper. Ron typically sprays after the first cutting, and sometimes up to 3 times per year. The bulk of the high fertility needed for good alfalfa crops comes from manure, with solid manure worked in spring ahead of corn planting, and liquid manure applied after chopping the corn silage. He uses some potash as soil tests and field performance dictate, applying it after 1st cutting, as well as boron and sulfur. His appreciation for manure's fertilizer value has grown as potash costs have increased. Ron stresses that fertility cannot be short-changed. "You must put it in the front end, or you won't get it out the back end."

Ron targets a 30-35 day cutting schedule, which usually means 3 or 4 cuttings per year. Stands in their final year will sometimes get up to 5 cuttings. Based on periodic weights, Ron knows that his alfalfa crop averages around 5 tons/ac. Tough weather in 2006 brought the average down to 4.5 tons/ac, but some fields in some years produce over 6 tons/ac.

Making hay. The Pagels put up both small and big squares, as well as round bales. Hay quality matches the range of needs in what will consume it, from beef quality to horse and dairy quality. His horse clients get mostly small squares, but his larger clients have had success with his large squares. Though 30-35 day cutting intervals are his usual target, he will often intentionally extend the cutting interval between 2nd and 3rd or between 3rd and 4th cuttings. This provides an opportunity for alfalfa to fully replenish root reserves while providing what Ron considers an ideal horse hay. Full-flower alfalfa provides the fiber horses need and dries more quickly and completely, reducing the chances of mold that cannot be tolerated in good horse hay.

Ron also puts full-bloom alfalfa hay to good use with the young stock and dry cows from his dairy. Mature or rained-on hay works just fine for his beef cows, too, and can be supplemented with a little high-quality corn silage if needed. In fact, Ron says he got into beef cows initially as an additional “market” for his hay.



Son Tim demonstrates the same dedication to a high-quality effort.

Silage student, too. Ron takes his corn silage management just as seriously. He uses full season (110-115 RM) hybrids with soft-textured kernels, since he does not use a kernel processor. He likes seeding high populations in narrow rows, targeting 40-45,000 plants/ac in 15 inch rows, for a high yielding, high quality silage crop. He achieves this with two passes with a 30 inch row planter. Ron has experimented with this. He stresses that ample fertility is critical. On his farm, all that fertility comes from the organic matter and N generated by 3-4 years of prior alfalfa crops and manure. When he first tried high populations in 30 inch rows, he found the ears didn't mature and fill fully. Going to the narrower row spacing took care of that. On average, he will chop around 30 tons/ac into both upright and pile silos. He knows he has harvested as much as 33 tons/ac. The corn silage goes up at around 65% moisture and all gets inoculated. Pagel stresses there are great differences among inoculants, but he has found a couple that work well for him.



Ron, his son Tim, and wife Lori use selfless teamwork to benefit their farm and their community (Not pictured: son Jeff).

Marketing and Feeding. Ron has about a half-dozen steady horse clients, ranging from 10-50 horses each. Rarely do two of these clients want the same thing, but Ron strives to give them what they want. In fact, he guarantees it. Some horse folks prefer more grassy hay while others tell Ron they want only what he would feed to his milk cows. But all horse owners want mold-free hay, adequately dry and stored well. Several clients have hay sheds that Ron fills directly from the field once per year. Other clients without storage see Ron more frequently. Ron delivers hay to them as needed, often with as little as 1-2 days notice. Ron stresses that high corn prices have many of his clients appreciating the value of the good-quality hay he provides even more.

Ron's dairy cows do not get short-changed either. He keeps the best for them. He feeds a TMR including a 50:50 corn silage:alfalfa mix, with about 4 lbs/day of that alfalfa as dry hay. He maintains that dry alfalfa hay ensures a little more fiber and thus healthier rumens, higher butter fat, and fewer DAs. He feeds the corn silage from his uprights during the warmer months so he never has to struggle with frozen silage. The piles are fed during the colder months, when face spoilage is at a minimum.

Community-minded. The Pagels put high value on education. Amidst all the activity on the Pagel farm, Ron somehow finds time to serve as President of the Olmsted County Farm Bureau, Chair of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Ag-in-the-Classroom state committee, and

Chair of his local school board. He is also very involved with FFA, and a frequent speaker/advocate for agriculture at local schools. His wife Lori teaches agriculture at Kasson-Mantorville High School. Both University of Minnesota grads, their oldest son Jeff is now studying Animal Science at the University of Minnesota.

Unfortunately, Ron was in a serious car accident early this spring. Talking to him over the phone, however, you would never know he is supposed to stay off his feet for 3 months. His enthusiasm, good humor, and kindness are stronger than ever. The forage industry is indeed fortunate to have folks like Ron and his family in our corner. Get well soon, Ron!