

Custom Baling and Tubing Business Serves Local Farming Community

by Dan Martens, Benton County Extension, Paul Peterson, University of Minnesota

For nearly 15 years, Dave Feldeverd milked cows on his 3rd-generation farm near Melrose, MN, but he knew early on where he could best serve the dairy industry. His passion is growing forages, running equipment, and managing the daily challenges of a custom harvest/storage business, and serving his 20 customers.

Dave has owned and operated his 265-acre Stearns County farm, with 165 tillable acres, since 1981, and milked cows until the mid-1990s. Since then, he has focused on hay and baleage production on his own acreage and custom harvests for numerous producers. In addition to his custom harvest operation, he also feeds out about 40 steers.

He irrigates 120 acres, which includes clay hills, sand, and gumbo. His main crop is alfalfa, but recently he has been planting alfalfa/grass mixtures (at 25 lbs/ac) including: orchardgrass, timothy, and smooth brome. "I have found the demand for alfalfa/grass mixtures has been increasing in recent years," said Dave. He aims for a 60:40 alfalfa/grass mixture with a 4.5-5 ton hay/ac yield under irrigation. He experimented with mountain brome and tall fescue on some of his dryland acres, however, due to dry conditions he did not get a good stand.

He typically grows corn for a year between alfalfa seedings and, occasionally, spring wheat followed by minimum tillage. Regardless of rain, Dave usually seeds his alfalfa by the first week of August using a field cultivator, drill and packer. He prefers late season planting as it results in less weed pressure and more consistent stands than spring planting.

He has also experimented with several warm-season annuals between alfalfa seedings, but was disappointed with their yields compared to corn, even under irrigation. The 150-170 bu/ac corn grain yields he can achieve between alfalfa seedings is a better bet.

Dave works with a crop consultant to monitor pests and fertility. His management plan includes: pulling soil samples annually, fertilizing with manure from his livestock (corn, not alfalfa), keeping alfalfa stands 3 years beyond seeding year and taking 3-4 cuts per year. Dave aims for 145-165 RFV, believing this achieves the best balance between yield and quality.

He bases the timing of his first cut on scissors clip/PEAQ monitoring, while cutting his second crop just past flowering. Dave lets the third and fourth crops stand a little longer. He avoids cutting between September 7 and mid-October unless he is planning to plow up the stand. He cuts with a 12 ft disc conditioner, aiming for a 4-5 ft swath for faster drying. After cutting, he rakes 2 windrows together in the morning to prepare for baling later in the day.

Dave bales big squares and rounds, using both dry and wet hay; although he sees less crop failure risk with wet hay. Dave bales dry hay up to 23% moisture with propionic acid applied. He says, "Many customers want to skimp on preservatives, but the risk is that you save a buck on one hand and lose 20 in the other." In the end, he leaves the decision up to the customer. Dave's experience in using preservatives is that you may notice some browning, but there will be no mold.

Dave likes the Pronovost inline plastic tuber, from Quebec, Canada. He has owned the tuber for 5 years and feels that it is a simple machine that gets a lot of use. For making baleage, he likes to bale with wet hay from 25-70% moisture. Dave says, "I prefer around 50% moisture for good fermentation, yet dry enough to get it apart in frozen winter conditions; and I prefer 65% moisture over 30%. It typically has less spoilage." He wraps both rounds and squares, but notes that stems of square bales are more prone to popping through the plastic.

In-line tube wrapping is usually cheaper than wrapping bales individually. The price of plastic has gone up 20%, so custom rates have to be adjusted to account for this and other costs associated with wrapping. Dave advises, despite costs, not to skimp on plastic.

Wrapping wet hay for baleage can provide high quality forage. Dave says, "You can wrap hay as a last resort when the weather looks bad for dry hay, but it is best to know your intention when you cut it, so you can wrap it at a more ideal moisture." Dave also cautions people to remember that wrapping hay that has gotten musty or slimy, due to adverse weather, will not make it any better. Instead, he recommends feeding damaged hay as soon as you can to prevent damage to livestock.



Dave has operated his custom baling and tubing service in the current format since 1998, and appreciates working with many of the same customers from year to year. Most of his baling customers are within 5 or 6 miles, and a little farther distance for his wrapping customers. He hires a few part time workers, as needed. Dave fits his own crop work around the needs of his customers. The majority of the wrapping is done after 8:00 p.m. and it is common to work until midnight, sometimes on only 2-3 hours of sleep. Dave says he has done around 70 round bales in an hour when things are running well.

Dave does most of his work with alfalfa, and has done some oatlage and barlage. He believes it is best to harvest small grain for hay in the boot-early heading stage. Dave says “When it is headed out, you have to be ready to bale right after cutting in order to have enough moisture for wrapping.” He continues, “You are constantly learning. You come across new things every year.”

Dave is an MFA member and serves on the Central Minnesota Forage Council board. He works 2 days a week at an off-farm job with some flexibility and good bosses – and he likes where things are going for him and his business.

Photography by Richard Raeker, Stearns County Publishing