

## Organic Hay is His Business

*by Dwain Meyer, North Dakota State University*

Kevin Falk, owner and operator of Falk's Organic Farms, has been farming at Tappen, ND, since 1980. Kevin made the decision several years ago to convert his farm to organic and decided that the best way to qualify his acres as organic was to raise alfalfa during the transition. Soils in North Dakota are natively high in potassium and good stands of alfalfa will out-compete most weeds if harvested frequently. Phosphorus fertility might be the only concern. Few insect and disease problems occur, so rarely would any chemical control be needed even if alfalfa was in conventional production. Therefore, conversion to organic production with alfalfa is quite simple with little loss of production.

Falk Farms today produces 650 ac of irrigated organic alfalfa. In addition, he raises wheat (nearly 1,500 ac), corn, blue corn (80-200 ac), barley, flax, rye and soybean organically. Kevin and his dad organically farm nearly 5,000 ac, with 1,435 ac of that under irrigation. He uses many rotations and will put wheat, corn or flax on alfalfa to enhance production. He is trying to introduce another legume (soybean) into the cropping sequence, but his results this last year were not as good as hoped. Weeds in the 30" row soybeans caused harvesting problems. He likes to use rye and occasionally buckwheat when he feels weeds are and selling 5 tons/ac consistently, which is good for our short growing season. We take three harvests after the establishment year. We try to take the first harvest off at early bud if the weather allows,

which this year resulted in hay testing 175 relative feed value (RFV) and 22-23% crude protein. We take the third harvest at first bloom, which this year ran 305 RFV, due to the reduced growth this past year."

Most of the organic hay is marketed to western North Dakota dairy producers, but hay has been sold into Wisconsin previously. "We deliver most of our hay one to two months after harvest," says Kevin. The cost of transportation this past year, coupled with the higher value of this type of hay, pushed the overall price to a level which caused some buyers to cut back from their normal purchases of organic hay. "I'll sell it as conventional hay if I have to" comments Kevin, "but we haven't had to yet. We sell the best hay and feed the rain-damaged hay to our 180 cow-calf herd. This helps keep us known as a high-quality hay producer, which is very important."

Kevin hopes to grow his organic hay business since it often has the greatest economic return, but with today's high price (\$1.00 - \$1.25/relative forage quality point), he sees the market for organic hay backing off some. He's always looking for new markets, but the cost of transportation limits the distance that he can deliver without the total cost becoming prohibitive. As a result he is moving towards the medium square bales to improve hauling efficiency.