

Taking Farming to New Heights

by Kyle Schell, South Dakota State University

Michael Lentsch and his wife Diane own and operate Lentsch Hay Farms near Veblen, SD, in the northeast corner of the state. Their 1,260 ac farm is located six miles from the ND/SD border; however, Michael has not always lived in this area. He grew up in Waterloo, IA, and moved to Veblen in 1985. Michael's father was originally from Roslyn, SD, which neighbors Veblen. Michael is innovative in finding new markets and producing the type of hay required for that market.

When the Lentsch family moved to Veblen, they initially tried raising cattle. They sold hay also, but it was barely covering the costs of production. He did learn, however, that by producing hay and marketing it, one can control profits. It seemed with cattle they were constantly at the mercy of the cattle market. In 1989, they began to phase out cattle and focus strictly on hay production. They started producing alfalfa hay for dairies, but soon realized that many people were already in the market. Thus, Michael began to investigate new markets. Now Michael has stands of alfalfa/timothy grass and alfalfa/orchard grass. He also has some straight orchard grass stands and some native prairie hay also. He produces both round and small square bales.

Over the years Michael has learned many tricks of the trade when it comes to producing the best quality hay. The outer 4-5" of a round bale accounts for approximately 25% of the entire bale. By switching to mesh wrap, he has reduced the spoilage on the outer part of the bale. He also stacks his round bales in rows North to South. This allows both sides of the bale to receive equal amounts of sunlight. By doing this, he can reduce spoilage from moisture that may occur after the hay is baled. He also records the hay that is cut on cloudy days. Usually this hay can be marketed as low carbohydrate hay for which there is a market in the equine industry. If the hay is cut on a sunny afternoon, it will likely be sweet and higher in carbohydrates, which some of his other customers prefer. Michael enjoys attending forage seminars and learning innovative practices to keep educating himself and improving his practices.

Interestingly, the Lentsch Hay Farm is located on the highest point between the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers and also between the Gulf Coast and Canada. Michael has had several customers tell him that his hay is similar to high altitude hay that is produced in Colorado and other states to the west. He said that the cool-season grasses perform the best on his place because of the shorter growing season in his area.

Michael tests all of his hay, stressing the importance to accurately price his hay. He formerly used the SDSU testing labs; however, most of his customers now require a test from Dairyland Labs. He requests a relative feed quality (RFQ) test, as well as a relative feed value (RFV) test. RFQ is becoming a more popular test because it includes the digestibility of the feed. An example is Michael's orchard grass hay, which has a higher RFQ value than alfalfa because orchard grass contains lower levels of lignin. Michael indicates it is a challenge explaining to people that RFQ is a superior test than RFV and that they should buy their hay based on the RFQ test.

The majority of the hay Michael produces remains in the state of South Dakota; however, he has sent some as far away as Ohio. The majority of his hay is used for the equine market because the grass and alfalfa mix works well for them. Michael does not get many

Photo 1. Finishing one of many large-round bales.



Photo 2. Prepping hay for baling.



Photo 3. Semi load of square bales.



new customers because his hay is sold entirely to repeat customers. This shows how good his product is, as well as how fair he is in his dealings with customers. Michael also has pasture and other farmland. He doesn't get too excited about other crops though, as hay is his number one passion.

In addition to his hay production, Michael works as a full-time deputy sheriff in his County which keeps him extremely busy in the summer. He couldn't get it all done without the help of his wonderful family. His wife Diane, who also works off the farm at Marshall Land & Trust, is critical to the operation, maintaining all of the records for the hay business. She can also run most of the equipment. The two of them, along with their four children, put up all the hay. Michael says that marketing is an important factor to a successful hay farm. He spends much of the winter on the phone staying in contact with his customers. They all enjoy doing business with him and keep coming back to Lentsch Hay Farms.