

Forage Focus - Producer Interview - March 2010

Teamwork Pays

by Kyle Schell, South Dakota State University



Mark Rogen is no stranger to the Midwest Forage Association as he has served on the Board of Directors for the past three years and has been an MFA member since its inception. He believes in MFA's mission; especially its focus at the national level. Mark has always been a staunch believer in commodity organizations. His father was a past president of the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association and Mark assisted in organizing the South Dakota Corn Growers Association in 1988. He also served as a South Dakota state legislator from 1993-1996.

Mark's farm is located near Garretson, SD. He began by working on his father's farm which included a corn and bean rotation as well as a finishing feedlot. In the late 1990's, they began converting to a commercial hay business producing mid-sized square bales. Currently, he partners with a neighbor and harvests alfalfa on 700 acres of hay ground. This partnership has allowed them to expand their capital and purchase newer haying equipment. The hay they produce is top quality, much of it going to local dairies.

Mark collaborated with another neighbor who managed a 1,500 head dairy as well as some farm land. They built a second dairy on Mark's farm which they have expanded to milk ~2,800 head of cows.

All of the hay produced on his 700 acres of hayland feeds both dairies. Mark's responsibilities in the partnership include managing the employees as well as helping with hay, corn, and bean harvest on both dairies. His partner manages the dairies. They attempt to maintain low feed costs by producing their own hay, haylage, silage, and high moisture ground corn. The dairies also require supplementation with a processed product they receive from a local elevator as well as beet pulp obtained from Minnesota. Even with all of the acres on which they produce forage, they are still forced to purchase hay from local producers. Maintaining low freight costs is also important.

Mark has used several brands of alfalfa seed on his operation including: Dairyland, Pioneer, Croplan, Golden Harvest, and W-L. He uses the top-rated seed no matter which company produces it. His crop rotation has changed over the years, too, in keeping up with the objectives of his operation. When he was selling his hay commercially, he planted alfalfa on soybean stubble. The old soybean fields would usually be the first to warm up in the spring and would be smooth and firm, ideal for planting alfalfa. He cultivated twice in the spring while pulling a roller packer to prep the seed bed. He then planted alfalfa with a Brillion seeder. Now, due to the corn requirements for the dairies, they do not plant soybeans.

Mark has his alfalfa in a 3-year rotation planting where they cut silage and applied manure heavily the previous year. Seed bed preparations include light disking in the spring followed by field cultivation. He then packs the soil with a Brillion packer before he seeds it with a press drill. With both types of rotations, early planting is desirable as is seeding at ≥ 20 lbs/ac. Since much of the crop is harvested as haylage, they are able to obtain at least 3, and sometimes as many as 5, cuttings/year depending on weather conditions.

Mark is hopeful for the return of Roundup Ready® Alfalfa. He seeded Roundup the first year it was introduced and was successful with it. "It stops the early weeds so the alfalfa gets a good start," says Mark. He is impressed with the new technologies available in agriculture and is receptive to trying new ones as they become available.

When asked about the future of the dairy business, Mark says the outlook is good. People still need to eat and drink milk, and populations are continuing to grow worldwide. Mark takes his responsibility to feed this growing population seriously. It has been a challenge to get through the current economic crunch, however, Mark remains optimistic. "You have to keep looking forward," Mark advises.

Mark is proud of the wonderful family that he has in South Dakota. His wife works for Sanford Health in Sioux Falls and his three children all live within 150 miles of their home. His oldest daughter works in Sioux Falls and his middle daughter lives in Iowa. His youngest son is a freshman at South Dakota State University which is Mark's alma mater.

