

Buy Hay—Not Trouble

When buying hay from an unknown source, take the proper precautions, or you could get more than you bargained for.

Story & photos by Ed Haag

If you are in the cattle business long enough, it is bound to happen. You think you have your winter hay supply covered, but then the unexpected happens. Suddenly, you are faced with the necessity of finding another source to get your herd through the winter.

Normally you would call a neighbor or two and buy some of their surplus, but this time they have none to spare. In fact, they are also on the lookout for hay. For the first time, you are faced with the prospect of buying hay you know nothing about from people you do not know.

“It is surprising how many beef producers find themselves in that situation, and because it has never happened to them before, they don’t know what to do,” says Don Kieffer, executive director of the National Hay Association (NHA). “It can be overwhelming.”

For those who are forced to purchase hay long distance, regional hay brokers may be of assistance, says John Kugler, Washington State University (WSU) Extension forage educator. He notes that in the Northwest many of the brokers deal exclusively in high-quality alfalfa hay for dairies and export, but that shouldn’t prevent a beef producer from inquiring about feeder hay.

“They look at a lot of hay,” Kugler says. “They may not want it for their market, but probably will give you a tip [as to] where there may be some that would work for feeder hay.”

Other good sources of information on who might have feeder hay for sale are the regional and national hay associations. “We have a directory of hay growers and sellers across the country,” Kieffer says. “We can steer you in the right direction.”

Kugler says rain-damaged, first-cutting dairy hay is a good place to start this year. “In the Northwest we have seen a lot of early hay that has been knocked out of the dairy and export

market,” he says. “That will probably end up as feeder hay.”

Kieffer adds that similar situations exist throughout the country, but that is only one part of the story. Other hay production areas have been affected by winterkill and prolonged droughts. “It is a real mixed bag,” he says, noting that the combination of conditions will probably force some beef producers to look outside of their immediate area for their winter supply of hay.

This can be tricky, Kieffer says. The quality of rain-damaged hay can vary dramatically. He believes the two best ways to determine whether or not it is worth buying are visual inspection and lab test results.

Use your nose

Once a potential hay lot has been located,

the next step is to do an on-site inspection. Kugler says when checking the hay, be sure to look below the surface. Some hay can have some surface damage and be perfectly good inside. After checking inside a bale (a probe can be handy), calculate how much is waste and subtract that from the total asking price to see if it is worth buying. Don’t forget to add the cost of hauling into the equation.

Another reason to visually inspect prospective feeder hay is to check for the presence of weeds and other unwanted pests. Weedy hay can lead to new infestations, and some plants, such as common groundsel, are actually toxic to cattle.

“If there is enough of it in hay it can cause chronic liver failure,” says Sarah Smith, WSU Extension educator specializing in ruminants.

Toxic weeds aren’t the only pests a prospective hay buyer should be looking for. Imported fire ants (IFAs) are also a concern. Fire ants were accidentally introduced into the United States from South America, beginning in about 1918. *Solenopsis richteri*, or the black IFA, was the first of two species of fire ants to be introduced via shipping into Mobile, Ala.

In 1958, the Federal Imported Fire Ant Quarantine (7CFR301) was enacted to slow the artificial spread of IFAs from infested (quarantined) areas to non-infested (non-quarantined) areas. The Imported Fire Ant Quarantine includes all of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Puerto Rico; most of South Carolina; and parts of Arkansas, California, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and Tennessee.

Kugler advises producers to check with their Extension agent before committing to purchasing hay from a questionable source.

Kieffer is a firm believer in using all his senses when



► Some hay can have surface damage, but still be good inside.

inspecting hay. This is especially true for making note of how it smells. "We always like to say that hay should be sweet, cool and fresh," he says. "Be sure it has a nice sweet smell to it — not moldy or off."

Mold should be of particular concern to cow-calf operators, Kugler says. "You should watch out for that if you are feeding pregnant cows. It can cause them to abort their calves."

Bob Humpal, who buys, sells and auctions more than 20,000 tons of hay annually at his Fort Atkinson, Iowa, hay company, has seen his share of spoiled hay. "There is a lot of worthless stuff out there," he says. "It may seem fine until you start feeding it. The cattle won't eat it, and they end up stepping on most of it."

Like Kieffer, Humpal recommends using the nose to detect mold or any other odors that might put the cows off their feed. "A lot of cows won't eat hay that has a hog smell," he warns. "If it has been stored too close to a confinement operation, cows will back off."

Testing for trouble

In addition to seeing the hay, most experts agree that test results are a very important part of evaluating baled hay. Don't be afraid to ask a hay seller if he has any test results on his product, as sellers don't always volunteer that information. This is particularly important when purchasing grain hays such as oat, barley, wheat and triticale, as well as alfalfa, Sudan grass, Johnson grass and common Bermuda grass grown under drought-stressed dryland conditions.

Smith notes that these crops can accumulate levels of nitrate (NO₃) that are toxic to livestock. When the plant receives adequate moisture, applied nitrogen (N) is rapidly converted into grain protein as the crop heads and matures. However, when the plant is drought-stressed, rather than converting the nitrogen into protein, it is accumulated in the stem. "It is best to get it tested for nitrate toxicity," she says. "Otherwise you could be looking at some real problems."

An inexpensive preliminary Nitrate QuikTest is available through some state Extension agencies. Training and certification are required. For those who prefer sending samples directly into the laboratory, contact your local Extension agent for the one nearest you.

To understand the gravity of the issue, in Montana alone more than 4,300 samples have been tested with the Nitrate QuikTest since 2000, two-thirds of which required further laboratory tests.



► **Left:** Ask the age of the hay and if it has been covered.

► **Below:** Make sure the seller has the right equipment to do the job.

Out of those samples tested in the laboratory, one-third of the corresponding hay lots had to be limit-fed, blended or destroyed.

When visual inspection isn't possible

Since 2000, the amount of hay purchased sight unseen — much of which has been sold on the Internet — has increased dramatically. Several commercial, university and government agency-sponsored sites post listings for hay. Internet hay auctions have also emerged as regular long-distance marketers of hay.

Hay sites on today's Web range in complexity from static lists of sellers and buyers to sophisticated search engines that automatically shortlist prospective buyers or sellers in accordance with a user's criteria.

For the prospective buyer it is imperative to get as much information as possible. Many hay sellers will post acid detergent fiber (ADF) and relative feed value (RFV) information. Others will provide the information when requested. Talk to the seller directly over the telephone. Kugler says don't be afraid to ask a prospective supplier questions in addition to what is listed on the Web site. This will give you a better feel for



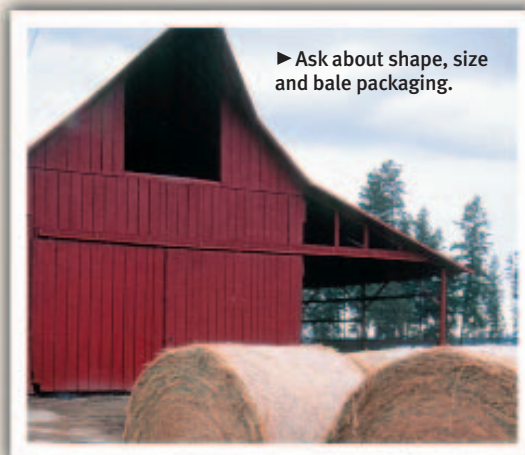
the product, as well as an indication of what kind of producer he is.

He says to be sure to ask: Where was the hay grown and under what conditions? Was it fertilized? What is its color? If there is bleaching, did it occur in the windrows or after the hay was baled? What type of bale is it in? How long has it been stored? Was it covered? Are there any arrangements for transportation? Before ending the conversation, be sure to ask for references, and don't hesitate to call them.

In addition to direct information from the seller, Kugler says your best tool for evaluating long-distance hay is networking with the community where the hay was grown. A good start is checking with Extension people in the area. If they don't know the person who is selling the hay, they might know someone who does. Agents should also know if there are some potential risks that should be addressed such as nitrate drought stress and local quarantine issues.

Finally, remember the Internet is a work in progress, so fraud is always a possibility. Be sure to do your homework thoroughly before acting and, if fraud is suspected, contact your state department of agriculture.

The Iowa Beef Center maintains a list of national and regional hay marketing sites at www.iowabeefcenter.org/content/hay_pages.htm. Angus Productions Inc. (API) also hosts a hay finder link at www.angusjournal.com/drought. Refer to "Needle in the Haystack," page 122, in the May 2005 *Angus Journal* for additional hay-buying strategies.



► **Ask about shape, size and bale packaging.**