



Make Ours a Stack

While the cost of conventional hay baling rises with the price of the latest labor-saving piece of equipment, putting up loose stacks remains a testament to manpower and ingenuity.

Story & photos by Ed Haag

Commercial Angus beef producers Heidi Hirschy and Dan Hosko of Big Hole, Mont., aren't the type of people to give up on a system that has proven itself through the

years. Nor are they the type to drop \$100,000 on a piece of equipment just because some big farm implement company says they should.

So, it shouldn't be surprising that half of the 4,000 acres of hay they put up annually still employs a beaverslide staker, a system that dates back to the turn of the last century.

"For our area and our kind of ranching it has always worked well," Hirschy says. "With a good crew, we can put up a lot of hay in a short period of time."

She estimates that on a productive day they can erect 18 to 20 loose stacks — each one consisting of 20 tons of native grass hay and reaching a height of 30 feet (ft.).

"We can do about 150 acres a day," Hirschy says, adding that the length of time it takes to build a stack is predicated on how fast the crew can pick up the hay and deposit it in the beaverslide.

Because they feed their animals at the same site at which they produce the hay, there is no need to convert forage into a movable package. "Each stack is fenced to keep the cows out until the hay is needed," Hirschy says. "Then we let them at it."

Hirschy admits that the major drawback to the beaverslide is its reliance on manpower. Most of the time it takes a crew of more than 20, most of whom are involved in filling the



► On a productive day, a beaverslide crew can build approximately 18, 20-ton, 30-ft.-tall haystacks

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stacker. “That is a lot of hay to gather up in a short time,” she says.

Homemade ingenuity

After the hay is cut and allowed to dry for at least a full day, it is raked into windrows just as if it were being prepared for baling.

To gather up the hay and convey it to the beaverslide, Hirschy uses a homemade piece of equipment called a buckrake. This is an old truck that has had its cab removed and its transfer case turned over so the gears turn in the opposite direction. On what is now the front is attached a 15-ft. x 6-ft. hay bucket with 6-ft. pointed guides that resemble a hair pick comb. Hydraulics are attached to the bucket, so the driver can raise and lower it from where he sits.

Once the buckrake has driven down enough windrows to fill its haybucket, it returns to the beaverslide and deposits its load on a slide that conveys the hay to the top of a 50-ft. ramp that sits on a 45° angle. There the hay is dumped into what will become a 30-ft.-tall, 20-ton haystack. Two men remain on the stack to redistribute the hay between dumps.

Usually following behind the buckrake is the scatterrake, a device towed behind a tractor that has spring tines designed to pick up the hay dropped by the buckrake and carry it over to the windrows where a three-point hitch raises the rake, depositing the hay where it belongs.

Hirschy uses another piece of homemade ingenuity to move the hay up the beaverslide — a second converted truck that functions as a high-powered winch. Referred to as “the hoist,” it has been modified so that it has

two drivelines. The first driveline allows it to operate as a vehicle when it is not used as the muscle behind the beaverslide, while the second driveline turns the modified truck into a motor-driven drum winch when the vehicle is securely attached to the beaverslide.

In spite of their satisfaction with the beaverslide stacking system, in recent years Hirschy and Hosko have had to start round-baling half of their 4,000 acres. “It is just harder and harder to put a crew together,” Hirschy says. “Every year it gets tougher.”

Stacking solo and to go

While the need for extensive manpower remains a major drawback for the beaverslide, some innovative individuals have developed stacking systems that effectively deal with that issue.

Several years ago Bobby Packard of Yakima, Wash., was faced with a dilemma. Baling wasn’t working, and as a one-man operation, he had to find a solution that didn’t involve large crews of skilled beaverslide operators.

“I used to bale with a small baler but liked getting regular sleep too much,” he says, laughing.

As he explains, farming in an area with such low humidity has forced hay producers to take special measures to prevent dried alfalfa leaves from separating from their stems during baling.

“I was forced to bale in the middle of the night when the night dew keeps the leaves supple enough not to shatter,” Packard says.

He looked into purchasing one of the new self-propelled machines that produced

the large square bales. “They don’t seem to require the same narrow moisture tolerances that the small balers do,” he says. “One of my neighbors bought one, and he now bales during most days.”

But for Packard, it wasn’t that simple. After pricing even the stripped-down model, the cost was prohibitive for the size of his operation.

Unless he wanted to become a custom baler — a vocation that would take time away from his commercial Angus herd — he would have to think of another way to put up the four cuttings on his 500 acres of irrigated alfalfa. “I wasn’t about to get rid of my cow-calf operation,” he says.

It was then Packard learned hay could be stacked during the day without shattering the alfalfa leaves. For him it was a match made in heaven. He could avoid the cursed midnight baling while putting his hay up in stacks, and, most important, he could continue raising Angus.

By using an automated system, he is able to pile 12 five-ton stacks a day. Even more impressive, he works alone.

“I have done as many as 20 stacks in a day, but I haven’t done that many since,” he says. “I usually don’t like to work that hard.”

Packard is able to put up that impressive volume of hay by using the Haybuster 1680 Stack-eze, an automated stacker that was manufactured in North Dakota up until the mid-1990s. Packard bought two while they were still being built.

“I bought my first stacker to feed my cattle,” Packard recalls. “I’d stack and move it and then spread it out with a loader.”



► Each stack is fenced to keep the cows out until the hay is needed.

Not long after his first purchase, Packard saw the new piece of equipment as the way to market his premium hay. "We get four cuttings, and I found I needed customers to buy the extra hay I produced," he says. "Moving it in a stack worked for me and my customer."

Now Packard sells most of his hay by the 5-ton loose stack to a local dairy operator who blends it with corn silage and other ingredients in a homegrown version of a total mixed ration (TMR). What Packard doesn't sell for dairy forage he keeps to feed his own small commercial herd.

"My customer would just as soon have me dump it off in a stack," he says. "It saves him cutting strings and breaking up the bales."

His stacking system also offers him a simple and quick method of taking the hay off the field, so he loses no time putting on sprinklers to starting growing his next cutting.

"The longer the hay sits out there, the less tonnage you can produce over the season," he says.

Unlike the balers who sometimes have to wait for a week for the right dew, Packard can count on completing his stacking in half that time. "Normally it is a three-day process," he says. "Swath the first, turn the second and stack the third."

To Packard, the speed at which he was able to clear a field can, in part, be attributed to the simplicity of his operation. The automated stacker he uses consists of a round, wheeled platform with sides (the tub) that acts as an enclosure for forming the stack. The unit is pulled behind a tractor.

"It has a pickup just like a baler," he says. "The hay goes up a chute and is formed in the tub."

When the complete stack is formed, Packard stops at the end of the field.

"The Haybuster has a live chain deck on it," he says. "You just open the back gate and turn the chains on, and it unloads itself."

After being unloaded, the stacks are left for a couple of days to settle. "Then you use a trailer with a live chain deck to haul it to the dairy," Packard says. "It will crawl right under the stacks."

But Packard warns that stacking isn't for everyone. It is totally dependent on having a regular customer for your hay within a few miles of where the alfalfa is grown.

"With stacks, you either feed it or you take it to someone else who will feed it," he says. "Any more than 5 miles, it costs you more to get it hauled than you can gain."

