

TIME TO MAKE HAY

This Kansas farmer bales up a niche of his own.



Kyle Krier has heard enough hay-related puns and idioms to last a lifetime, but the one he tries never to ignore is, “Make hay while the sun shines.”

“Timing is everything when it comes to quality hay,” says Krier, Claflin, Kansas.

The proverb also holds a broader meaning for the young farmer. Hay is the crop that has allowed him to carve his own farming niche. After graduating from Kansas State University in 2006, Krier spent several years selling crop insurance before returning to the home farm full time in 2014.

“I wanted a cropping enterprise that I could put my own stamp on and something that would diversify the farm beyond wheat, soybean, corn and milo,” he says. “My experience in sales meant I wasn’t overly sensitive to hearing the word no, and that’s important in the custom hay business.”

His father, Kirby, grew up putting up small square bales and had moved to selling large rounds, mostly to the feedlots for grinding. “Dad had done a good job of maintaining and building that market, and we still do some round bales. But, by adding large square bales, I’ve been able to open up value-added markets beyond our local area. They offer ease in transportation.”

LABOR PAINS

Still, dad wasn’t quite as enthusiastic as son about stacking up more hay work. Haymaking done right is demanding. The farm averages four cuttings per year and may squeeze in a fifth when blessed with rainfall.

The younger Krier also helps with row crops and has his own crop insurance agency, and there is also the family’s small oil-production company. Then, there’s wife, Melanie, and their two little boys who like to be tucked in and read to at night.

The farm has traditionally eased summer labor pains by using a program that allows international college



students to work in a study-based exchange. “We have really enjoyed those experiences, but the pandemic required us to look locally for part-time help this summer,” he says.

What started as 80 acres of alfalfa has grown to slightly more than 1,000 acres. Popularity for other types of baled forages such as teff grass, millet and sorghum-sudangrass push his total forage acreage to just north of 1,500 acres. With nine main customers, shipping ranges from local deliveries (30 to 50 miles) up to 1,200 miles.

GRASS IS GREENER

It isn’t unusual for other farmers to peek over the fence and think the hay business looks promising, especially when other commodity prices decline.

“It may seem like cart before horse, but if you are serious about the hay business, it is best to have a market nearly locked up before you ever purchase any hay equipment,” Krier recommends. “I’ve seen too many new growers get left holding hay, especially if they don’t have cattle to push it through.”

University of Kentucky forage specialist emeritus Garry Lacefield spent his career teaching farmers how to grow forages and agrees marketing hay, not merely selling it, is critical for the hay businessperson.

Environmental conditions such as humidity and rainfall influence the type of forage that grows well in a region and the bale packaging system, he notes.

“The density of large square bales requires more drying than small square bales or even large rounds. Customers also need to be able to handle those bales—they may work for dairies but not the horse market,” he observes. ➤

Alfalfa cuts a big swath in Kyle Krier’s farming operation. Large square bales measure 3 x 4 and can weigh 1,350 to 1,400 pounds.





Integrity is another key ingredient in the hay business. “That means having a market for low-quality hay, because there will always be some that gets a bit too mature, caught a rain or has a few more weeds than is desired,” he says.

PRICE POINTS

The 2019 market choked down with medium- to lower-quality hay, Krier reports. “The market pretty much sets the price for sorghum-sudan, millet and grinder alfalfa. Those values decreased by 40% last year due to oversupply,” he estimates.

“Hay is one of the best supply and demand markets out there. Supply goes down, price goes up. Supply goes up, price goes down,” he says. “Still, the upper-end qualities aren’t as sensitive and held margin well last year. I like that it allows me to show management abilities.”

This year, several late-spring freeze events, armyworms, aphids and alfalfa weevil all showed up before the first cutting.

Krier tests every bale for attributes. Sometimes, customers request samples to do their own comparative



Knowing the cost of every operation and performing tasks in a timely fashion helps Kyle Krier make hay pay. Large square bales of alfalfa can range from \$70 to \$160 per bale, depending on quality.



analysis of the many components that represent quality and make up relative feed value (RFV).

“However, I may have some really high-quality testing hay on the RFV side, but palatability is terrible. That’s not going to work for a buyer wanting high-percentage consumption,” he says.

Krier ranks good agronomic practices and inputs (suitable varieties, fertility, insect and weed control) as the first factor in producing a quality crop.

“Timeliness is a close second and takes the cake from there on out,” he adds. The grower is constantly seeking a balance between achieving top yield and digestibility by cutting before the crop gets too mature.

Type and size of machinery factor in, too, he notes. “Used hay equipment is fairly affordable and can also attract others to the business. But, a worn-out swather is probably going to have a junky conditioner,” Krier says.

Conditioning is critical to getting stem and leaf to dry down together. Leaf retention is all-important to maintain nutritional quality. The longer forage sits after cutting, the bigger the risk to quality. Bale too soon, and mold threatens due to high moisture content.

Ultimately, making hay is a choreographed dance with Mother Nature constantly threatening to cut in at the most inconvenient moments. “She has little respect for the hay business,” Krier says.

“When I have hay on the ground, and the forecast is rain, there’s no sedative that can make me sleep.” ///