

BUILDING CREDIBILITY

Bill Rose¹

First of all, I would like to thank the 18th California Alfalfa Symposium and Dr. Marble for giving me this opportunity to participate in this panel discussion.

I am an alfalfa hay grower in the Tracy to Patterson area. My major concern is to produce top quality alfalfa hay for the dairy industry. I have been accused of being the highest priced hay producer in the state. I have had dairymen upset with me because they have to buy bigger milk tanks once they start using our best hay. One dairyman told me that I was the first person that he had ever purchased hay from that actually tested higher than the hay was represented.

Today I would like to discuss with you some of the concepts that make our operations profitable for us.

Seed selection is a very important first step in our journey to a satisfied dairyman. This first step may lead to some confusion. It will take time to read and understand all the different varieties and their individual characteristics. Two of the most important characteristics are resistance to bugs and root diseases. When you become satisfied with your selection, then you are ready to order the seed from a reputable source. I like to have my seed coated before planting, this process gives the seeds a little better chance to germinate. Some growers like to use 30 pounds of seed per acre. I prefer to use 15 pounds per acre. I would rather use more seed later if it looks like my stand is going to be light. In any event, remember there are over 22,000 seeds per pound. At 15 pounds per acre, that should give you over seven seeds per square foot.

Preemergence weed control is a must prior to planting. Whatever I can do to get a jump on winter weed will benefit me in the first three cuttings. The cleaner the stand the higher the quality. Start with a clean stand and try to keep it clean.

As the stand is being established, we need to make sure our water system is in place. We use open ditches with slide gates at each border. Twelve-hour runs are set up, making sure the drain water stays off the stand.

I use a pest control operator to monitor our pest problems. He is best suited to determine what products should be used.

Before we start cutting, we set up our schedule for all the fields, giving consideration to stand life, water, and reentry dates of treated fields. When we decide to start cutting, we double check to make sure the field is dry and the swathers are in the best possible condition. We try to match cut acres with our balers. We don't want to over cut if it looks like we might get behind in our baling operations. We rake two swathed windrows together only when we are sure there will be no leaf loss. Ideally raking the day before baling works best for us. Doing a good job by not leaving behind any hay that is not picked up by the balers will eliminate any "rerake" in the following cuttings.

Before we start our baling operation, we make sure our moisture meter doesn't exceed our predetermined amounts. On our meter we start at 26% and stop at 16%. By using these guidelines we are normally in the lab range of 10% which is ideal. When we start baling, we try to have our "harrow-bed" right behind picking up the bales. Leaving the bales in the field only adds to discoloration. When the harrow-bed is loaded with a 10-high stack, the operator dumps his load right then. The stack retriever comes to that spot and hauls the stack to the stack yard. The stack retriever affords the harrow-bed to be more productive. The stack retriever also weighs the load with built-in load cells.

Once the hay is stacked, it is identified and tested. In a day or two we have the lab reports. After these reports have been analyzed, the hay is priced.

As we become more familiar with these test reports and how they relate to "days between cuttings", we are better able to determine the quality of our product. Nutrient value and dollars per ton should be in proportion.

¹Grower, Vernalis and Pleasanton, California

Our delivery system consists of two retriever trucks. We can haul five to seven tons per load. If our delivery point is within 20 miles, we can deliver with the retrievers; if not, we will have to call in an outside trucking service.

Follow up is the most important aspect of our operations. We need to find out how well the hay is feeding. If the hay feeds good the dairyman will be happy and will likely become a repeat customer. If the dairyman gets better production, he is more likely to be able to justify paying more for the feed.

As we become more familiar with the dairymen's needs, we are better able to produce the hay that will fit his nutrition program.

If we continue to build our credibility, we can make money growing and marketing quality alfalfa hay.