

BATTLE OF THE BALERS: SMALL BALES

John Bennett¹

I own and operate Intermountain Seed and Supply, which includes seed distribution, sales, service, and custom hay baling. In case you're wondering why seed and baling, their seasons compliment one another as well as having a similar customer base. Before I started my business, I was the manager of a four thousand-acre farming and ranching operation in Macdoel, CA for seven years. The elevation there is about 4200 feet with alfalfa as the main crop. Minor crops grown in our area include small grains, strawberry nursery plants, sugarbeets, potatoes, and garlic.

My first exposure to in-line 3-tie balers was in 1996 when the ranch I managed purchased a 3-tie Hesston in-line baler. Previous to that, all the hay on the ranch was baled with conventional balers. I knew right away that this was the future of 3-tie balers because of their speed, consistent bale density, and longer baling window and higher leaf retention.

I started my custom baling business in 1997 with a New Holland 585. I pull the baler with a 1985 F250 diesel pickup set up with a fifth wheel hitch. I built a gooseneck hitch that bolts onto the factory baler tongue. After running the first season I decided I needed brakes for the 9,000 plus pound baler. I had my brother install an axle shaft with electric brakes and oil hubs. This was mainly for safety as I am highly mobile and do much of my traveling at highway speeds. I cover an area from Northern California to Northern Oregon.

My customers include absentee owners, owner operators and custom operators. I feel to remain competitive I must be able to "read" hay and package it to fit target markets. This year was an exception because much hay was of borderline dairy quality, so I baled at lighter weights to accommodate retail as well as dairy markets in case the baled quality did not meet dairy quality specs. I also buy straw in the field to bale and market for retail, export, and erosion control markets. This portion of my business continues to expand, but the grain market situation could lessen straw availability in the future.

I prefer to bale well-cured hay with dew moisture of 17 to 18%. I feel that this hay will sweat into a premium feed for most markets with minimal chance of spoilage. As we all know, perfect conditions are not always attainable. I bale between thirty and sixty acres per day depending on yield and weather conditions. I stop baling at a moisture level of 20% on the high side and down to the point where I loose leaf definition on the low side (about 10%). If there is stem moisture I will not bale over 16% moisture content. In our high desert area we sometimes do not receive much dew, so we have to adjust and bale with stem moisture. I find that I bale more low-moisture hay with the in-line baler than I ever did with conventional three-tie balers. We would typically stop at 12% with conventional balers and would have more leaf shatter even at that level than I do with my in-line baler.

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I believe that I can bale 150% more than a conventional baler for two reasons. First is from the moisture level advantage of baling to a lower moisture level with less shatter. This creates a longer baling window as the dew is coming on and going off. Second is that these balers seem to maintain a reliable bale length at lower stroke counts. I bale alfalfa at fourteen to sixteen strokes, barley straw at twelve to sixteen strokes and grass straw at eighteen strokes per bale. My customers request weight ranges from 70 to 150 pounds per bale which is why I installed a set of on-board bale scales with a stroke counter. This helps me to produce the desired product for each customer while baling a wide variety of materials.

The 3-tie bale market is still the most versatile of all bale sizes. I think the in-line design will continue to increase in popularity due to increased efficiency. The markets we sell into are dairy, retail, export, stock, and erosion control. The one market I see changing dramatically is the cattlemen with larger herds that feed on open range; they seem to be moving toward the larger bale sizes. I also see a shift toward larger bales in the dairy market as they relocate and expand. I believe there will continue to be a strong demand for 3-tie bales by smaller-scale stockmen as well as retailers, exporters and dairymen.