

BATTLE OF THE BALERS: MID-SIZED BALES

Dennis Dunlea¹

Dunlea Farms is located on the California Oregon border near the town of Malin. We farm on both sides of the border. The elevation is approximately 4,000 feet. We grow alfalfa as well as other crops including small grains and potatoes.

We decided that by changing from 3-twine bale to the big bales (3' x 4' x 8') we could do the same amount of work with less machinery and less labor. In speaking with other big baler owners and several hay brokers, the consensus was that the larger bales saved labor not only for the grower, but also the dairies who could feed them. In other words, if you had good hay it did not matter what size the bale was, you could sell it. However, most recommended the 3 x 4 x 8 ft. size because it ensured the truck could carry a full load. We personally liked the Freeman 1592 because it was easy to operate, and it had a hydraulic operating system (the plunger only cycles when the pre-chamber is full).

We bought our first big baler (Freeman 1500) four years ago. The day it came to the field, we parked our 2 little balers, 2 tractors, and the Harrowbed. Eliminating this equipment also allowed the operators to do different things. When the baling was done, that operator could load the truck and haul it to the barn with much less time and effort than the little bales. The more we got used to the Freeman, the more we liked it. We liked to keep our moisture under 16%, but because of the better leaf retention we did not mind baling at low moisture levels. We ended up doing most of our baling at night, starting when the hay was tough and generally baling until the dew got too heavy.

Two years later, we found out we had not really cut much in labor because we were doing three times as much hay as previously, so the same amount of people were being used. The biggest difference was again the speed and ease. We had added another Freeman (1592) so that we could speed up our own operation, as well as add more custom work to our schedule. This past year we bought an Ag-Bag haylage bagger that would allow us to put the hay up as haylage or dry. We are not sure exactly how this is going to work yet, but we do know we like putting up hay a day or two after it is cut. Our biggest problem was baling it wet enough; we were so used to drying everything out, we were not getting enough at the optimum moisture (55%). That problem was soon resolved and we bagged not only alfalfa, but also grass, wheat, barley, and oats. We have not opened any of the bags yet, so we are awaiting the results.

In closing, the big baler is outstanding. It is so much easier to move hay with front-end loaders and semis, than with hooks and chaps (we dumped a few cubes). Although we are not sure how the bagger will work, we already had the balers (Freemans can bale wet hay), the loaders, and the trucks. By adding the bagger, we hope to keep the balers running day and night. After all, the faster and more efficient we do our haying, the lower our cost...and higher our profit. The bottom line for any business is lower cost...higher profit.

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