

Round balers evaluated as harvesting method

Editor's Note: This is a report from people who have purchased and used large round balers for the past seven years.

In 1972 a revolution in harvesting hay took place. The shape of things switched from square to round — giant round, in fact. And while conventional square baler sales fell off in succeeding years, giant round baler sales experienced gains capturing many hearts of farmers and ranchers everywhere.

Now, after almost seven years, the novelty and newness are gone. Giant round baler owners have had time to analyze this "one-man system" and compare it with previous hay harvesting methods. What do owners think of the system, and more importantly, the product it produces? What do they think of the hay quality, the spoilage? How does it stand up to the weather when it's stored in the field? How does it compare to previous hay handling methods? What size baler works best? The analysis and answers, nearly 700 of them, were compiled by Vermeer Manufacturing Co., during a recent study of owner attitudes and purchasing

habits. The research is thought to be the first known large-scale follow-up study conducted since the introduction of the big round bale system. The findings are as follows:

What type of giant round baler do owners prefer? Nearly 85 per cent of the large round baler owners prefer the medium-sized unit (which produces a 6-foot by 5-foot package). The popularity of this size appears to have increased in recent years. According to Vermeer officials the percentage of Model 605 owners four years ago was 78 per cent. The 5-ft. by 4-ft. package also has gained a following in recent years because of its smaller, easier-to-handle size for dairy operations, and the lower tractor horsepower requirements to operate the machine.

Because of the handling problems akin to most dairy operations, dairymen have been reluctant to switch systems. However, several have devised their own home-made handling and feeding systems to accommodate the package. As a result the trend toward big bale systems among dairymen is increasing. Four years ago officials

claimed that only four per cent of their customers raised dairy cows. Today, the figure has jumped to nearly 11 per cent.

What kind of tonnage can an owner expect to harvest? Although some owners harvest approximately 15 tons per hour, the majority of giant round baler owners put up less than 11 tons of hay per hour (based on 1500 lb. bales). However, it should also be noted that geography, cutting time and operator's experience directly effect the rate of harvest.

One Kansas owner claimed a variation of four to twenty bales depending on season and conditions. On the other hand, an Ohio man, baled 172 bales all within nine hours.

In any event, the "thatched-roof" characteristic of the giant round baler works. The vast majority of owners are very happy with the weathering ability of the big round bale. Better than 85 per cent claim it is "good to excellent". Another 13 per cent classify it as fair, while less than 1 per cent of the owners are truly disappointed in the package harvested.

Those who complain about weathering problems

usually point to a 4 to 6 inch layer of waste on the outside perimeter of the baler. However, recent improvements in bale density have sealed up some of the waste, and as a result, mellowed most of the complaints among later model owners.

When the big round bale emerged seven years ago, one of the first questions asked was, "what are you going to do with that monster after you bale it" and "how do you feed it efficiently without waste or spoilage". Fenceline storage and simple tractor-mounted bale movers solved the first question. However, the latter one has always been suspect. Surprisingly, however, in this study giant round baler owners showed no clear-cut opinion on spoilage or waste when comparing the new system to previous hay baling methods. Nearly 30 per cent feel spoilage and waste is greater, but there is an equal number who feel that they've been able to reduce the waste and spoilage.

Obviously, the cost of hay, in recent years has encouraged owners to seek out efficient feeding and handling methods. As a result,

owners appear to be caring for their bales a lot more.

What about the quality of the bale in general? Ask giant round baler owners about overall quality of hay and, chances are, nearly 11 out of 12 of them would rate the big bale system either "as good or better" than previous baling systems. Roughly half of the owners see no difference in quality. Another 34 per cent consider it better.

What about storage? Almost 95 per cent store the bales in the field. However, several owners, especially in recent years, have started to shelter their bales for various reasons.

Incidentally, hay isn't the only product giant round balers are harvesting. Approximately, two out of every five owners harvest crop residues with giant round bale equipment. The big surprise, however, is the weathering ability of the giant round bale as experienced by those who have

harvested crop residues. Only 6.8 per cent find that this type of product stands up poorly to the elements, 72.3 per cent claim the package holds up "good to excellent". And 65 per cent also find the feed quality "good-to-excellent".

It also looks as though baling crop residues could continue to increase in the near future. Even among those who don't presently bale residues there is another 33 per cent who plan to in the future.

Ironically, one of the most obvious questions overlooked in the study was "the labor savings in both harvesting and handling", which most large package manufacturers claim to be the primary selling point. Nevertheless, the study triggered several comments related to the labor-savings like, "best machine I own... enjoy running it", "best piece of machinery on (the) farm".



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