

Wet Hay Can Cause Ohio Barn Fires

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Extremely rainy weather in some parts of Ohio may be pressuring farmers to store hay that is still wet, a dangerous situation that can cause barn fires, said Ohio State University specialists.

Barn fires in west-central Ohio resulted in losses of property and livestock this summer, apparently after wet, stored hay burst into flames from spontaneous combustion. In another case, a fire erupted when an electrical spark ignited hay dust.

The most common cause of hay fires is when the crop is stored wet, causing microbial action that can generate internal bale tem-

peratures well above 150 degrees, said forage agronomist Mark Sule, Ohio State University.

"After a certain point of heating from the mold growth, other chemical reactions begin to take place, and it raises the heat to a point where the hay can burn," Sule said.

In general, hay is considered too wet for storage if moisture levels are higher than 20 percent in small rectangular bales, higher than 18 percent in large round bales, and higher than 16 percent in large square bales.

To be sure, farmers can use one of a number of commercial moisture sensors and probes to test hay for moisture content, Sule said. These sensors are most accurate when put into the bale while it is in the baler chamber. A farmer can also use a microwave oven to determine moisture content. Refer to Ohio State FACT Sheet AGF-004-90, "Using a Microwave Oven to Determine Forage Moisture," also available online at (<http://ohioline.ag.ohio-state.edu/agf-fact/agf-004.html>).

However, the persistence of

rainy weather in some parts of the state are giving farmers limited choices when they harvest the crop this year, Sule said. "In some places great hay is being made, while other places are getting rained on a lot."

One tactic is to use chemical drying agents that can speed up the drying of legume hay, especially during the summer months, Sule said. These chemicals are applied to the crop stand as it is being mowed, he said.

Another tactic is to use hay preservatives that allow hay to be labeled at higher moisture content without excessive storage losses, Sule said. A sensor on haymaking equipment can efficiently regulate the application rate according to the moisture level of the hay during harvest. A uniform coverage is essential, he said. However, preservatives are not effective on hay with moisture levels above 30 percent.

If equipment is available, the farmer might think about using alternative harvesting methods for high-moisture hay. "Under poor drying conditions, put it up as haylage or baleage," Sule said.

"These are other options to go to during periods when only a one- to two-day wilting period is possible."

In addition to wet hay, fires can be caused when an outside source, such as an electrical spark, sets off high levels of hay dust in the air, said agricultural engineer Rick Stowell, Ohio State University. These conditions are similar to those that cause grain elevator explosions. However, these kind of fires are less frequent than those caused by wet hay.

Modern farm buildings are con-

structed of metal roofing and siding, but that should not lull farmers into thinking they are any more fireproof than traditional wooden structures, Stowell said. "Once a barn fire gets started, it's very hard to contain," he said.

Farmers can also limit the potential damage of a fire by planning in advance, Stowell said. New buildings should not be attached to existing structures unless absolutely necessary. The separation of structures keeps a potential fire confined to a single building.

Endorse Proposal

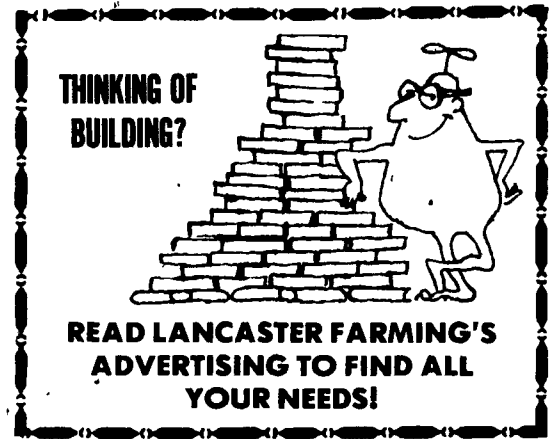
ARDEN HILLS, Minn. — Members of the Land O'Lakes and Countrymark Co-op boards of directors have strongly endorsed and unanimously approved a proposal to unify a majority of the cooperatives' farm supply businesses.

The plan will be presented to members of both organizations for their approval.

"Throughout our discussions with Land O'Lakes we have carefully considered ways by which we might provide greater, long-term value for Countrymark Co-op members through an expanded cooperative system. We have focused on the strengths of our respective businesses, which together will stretch from coast to coast, and we believe the proposed unification will benefit our combined membership," said Jeff Strobberg, president of Countrymark Co-op.

Jack Gherty, president and chief executive officer of Land O'Lakes, said, "Combining businesses with Countrymark Co-op is an important strategic step for Land O'Lakes. As a 77-year-old market driven cooperative, our history reflects many unifications that have shaped and molded and enhanced this organization. With the boards' support and member approval, this unification will move Land O'Lakes into the eastern corn belt region, add important critical mass to our system and strengthen our core feed, seed and agronomy businesses.

The two cooperatives will provide members with comprehensive information on the proposed unification prior to member voting, which will take place during August. If approved, it is expected the unification would be implemented October 1, 1998.



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