

Optimize Forage Markets

KEITH OELLIG
Grantville
PFGC Conference

Oel-Dell Farms is located along Rt. 81, approximately 12 miles north of Harrisburg.

The operation began in the mid 1980s when my father participated in the Dairy Buyout Program. At that time the operation consisted of approximately 100 acres of hay land and 200 acres of marginal corn ground.

Today my operation consist of about 1,000 acres of hay, soybeans, and small grains. I have one full-time employee and two part-time seasonal employees.

Because of my farm's close proximity to the Penn National Race Track, a one-mile thoroughbred horse race track that houses 700 to 1000 horses yearly—I have concentrated my farming operation to meet the needs of this clientele.

In recent years the clientele has shifted their forage needs from an alfalfa-based ration to more of a complete bagged feed supplemented with timothy grass hay. The result

of this has been a decrease in my alfalfa production acreage to more of a timothy-based production program. I am farming 350 acres of hay land.

Hay making equipment includes one hyaline, two rakes, two balers, a self-propelled stacker wagon, and seven conventional wagons. All hay at the racetrack is marketed by the bale, not by the ton. The hay stacking equipment requires a longer and heavier bale. This presented a marketing challenge when hay is marketed by the bale and not by the ton.

Pricing and service are the keys to my marketing strategies. By producing 90 percent of all hay that is marketed, I am not a hay broker. I am able to keep a consistent hay price throughout the year and from year to year.

As the horse feeding systems shifted from long hay to mostly complete bagged feeds, the bedding needs shifted from straw to wood shavings. In addition to providing hay at the track, the marketing of pine shavings for bedding material has become an important sideline for me.

I accept the manured bedding, brought to my farm by the horse trainers, as a component of my bedding sales. I utilize these shavings on approximately 500 acres of timothy and small grains. In addition I utilize poultry layer manure from nearby operations as a part of my fertility program.

Farming in the Grantville/Hershey/Harrisburg area presents many opportunities and challenges. A decreasing amount of available farmland and escalating land values is resulting in a smaller production base. But the increasing interest in pleasure horses in the region can provide alternative hay markets.

Food Retailers React

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the industry as an attempt to "get better control of the (food production) system," Dunn said.

As a result, contracts are more the norm, which provide less autonomy, he said, for farmers.

But there is no logical reason for farmers to bear the higher risk of global markets. Risk should be passed higher up, to help farmers, whose business already exists under tight margins, according to Dunn.

For ag students at Penn State, however, last year "was the best year ever for finding jobs," Dunn said.

At the conference, sponsored by the Pennsylvania Forage and Grassland Council (PFGC) and the Penn State-USDA-ARS Grazing Research and Education Center, three directors were elected to serve

three-year terms: John Thompson, producer from Volant; Duane Pysher, grassland management specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Harrisburg; and Ed Koncle, president-elect.

According to Richard Hann, PFGC secretary-treasurer, there are 216 members of PFGC and 22 supporting organizations, in addition to Penn State personnel. In 1999, the PFGC co-sponsored the hay show at the Pennsylvania Farm Show, the 1999 Pennsylvania Grazing and Forage Conference, the hay show at Ag Progress Days, and other events.

Scholarships totalling \$750 each were awarded to two Penn State students. In addition, a student at Delaware Valley College was awarded a \$750 scholarship.

A history of the PFGC is scheduled to be completed in July.

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