

Livestock and Natural Resources

I recently had a visit from one of my older sisters, she flew in from back east. I grew up with four older sisters, so I'm used to getting advice and being "straightened out". This trip I learned that I do not cut up a watermelon correctly. She also had her time predicting rain by the oak leaves. Of course this year, rain seems to be imminent!

It's not been exactly good haying weather. Make hay while the sun shines, as the old saying goes. Excessive moisture in hay can be a very real danger, as anyone witnessing a barn fire can readily attest. When hay's internal temperature exceeds 130 degrees Fahrenheit, it can spontaneously combust. Whether stacked in a barn in square bales, or lined up in rows, the effect can be equally dangerous. Heating occurs in hay above 15 percent moisture, hence the need to cut and bale the grasses dry.

The time-tested method to ensure bale density is optimized is, of course, to get off the tractor and check. Moving too fast in the interest of time can result in mistakes being made, and tweaks not fixed or set while running. But the quality of the hay maintained in the bale is dependent on the density of the bale, and from a safety perspective, loose hay is more likely to heat and combust than when properly packed. In addition to keeping an eye on the baler's density gauge, get out and kick the bales from time to time, with a general rule being that you shouldn't be able to stick your fingers into it, and if you kick it, your foot should smart just a little.

Keep cleanliness of the hay in mind. Set the baler pickup tines about an inch off the ground, ever remembering that hilly ground will be different than flat ground in this respect. Keeping your hay clean will lower ash percentages, which in turn improves quality and makes it easier to digest. Make sure the hay pickup flotation is set correctly so the pickup follows the contour of the ground and the tines aren't digging into the dirt. A good review and check in advance will help as it's easier to get replacement parts before the cutting than once you're in the field.

Baling hay is as American an activity as the apple pie and hot dogs. But keep safety in mind. Watch out for workers wanting to ride high atop a wagon loaded with shaky square bales, and be sure that all wagons bound for a road have a Slow-Moving Vehicle emblem. Don't forget to chock the wheels of wagons that can roll away, and it's a good idea to pick up a 10-pound dry chemical (ABC) fire extinguisher just in case.

And when all that's said and done, be sure to hook a radio up with some good

farming music and be prepared to smell the freshly cut alfalfa, brome, native or fescue grass, or whatever you may grow. The bright and shiny tractor in the field, the hamburgers on a grill, and the generations of farmers celebrating the season all make for an image everyone is proud to see.