

BATTLE OF THE BALERS: LARGE BALES

Dick Schader¹

I own and manage Red Rock Ranch located in eastern Siskiyou County. The elevation at the ranch is over 4,000 feet. The growing season is short and the weather extremely unpredictable. We farm between 4 and 5 thousand acres of alfalfa hay and cereal forage blends.

Before I start expounding on the virtues of 1 ton bales, I want to add a disclaimer. What works for Red Rock Ranch may not work for you. Everyone has their own ideas and angles, but what we do works for us. We do not do horse hay, feed store hay, etc. We specialize in dairy test hay and we live in a short growing season area where, if managed correctly, dairy test hay is normally possible all 3 cuttings.

We bought our first 1 ton baler in 1978, which was the first year they were available. Prior to 1 ton bales, we ran a pellet mill that converted 6 ton loaves to pellets. It's obvious I have a huge dislike for small bales and the minute something was available in a larger package we started to convert. We now run 9 new series Case and Hesston 4x4x8 balers. The new series computerized balers are much better than the 1st series chain driven old-style balers.

We have 8 swathers and cut between 350 and 500 acres a day. There is no problem with blooming hay or rank hay because with all the capacity and different varieties and stand age we never get behind. The 9 balers can do 1000 ton in 4 hours if necessary. The swathers all pull 500 gallon tanks with a desiccant. The desiccant gives us an edge on hay softness, drying time, color, and if the hay is rained on it seems to recover better with less leaf loss and shatter.

We like to keep the moisture in big bales below 14% because of the potential for mold. We leave an air gap between bales when they are stored. We watch the dew carefully. Desiccant treated hay is softer and absorbs moisture faster. This enables us to bale with incoming moisture. We stop once the dew comes in. Therefore, we are often finished baling before others can even start. We have very limited baling windows a lot of the time. We really try to bale with good humidity and moisture to keep bale weight and hay quality up. We never skip a night due to lack of dew. If necessary we will go out at 5 in the morning, even when it's dry, and the bales will still be okay. The in-line baling system, flake accumulator and slow plunger speed all help keep leaves on and up hay quality.

Once the hay is baled, it goes directly to covered storage. We have over 18,000 tons of covered storage and ship out of barns and refill with later hay cuttings. It seems that if the hay is left outside it will get rain on it by one freak storm or another.

Dairymen like to see the hay in barns. Dairymen like to see a lot of hay equipment. This usually means your trying to cut and bale the hay at just the right time instead of messing around continuously all summer long. In good years it may not be as important but in a year like this you need every edge you can get.

¹ Dick Schader, Red Rock Ranch, Macdoel, CA 96058

We use articulated front-end loaders and wore-out highway trucks to move the hay from the field to barns. We can average 150 ton an hour on a 4-7 mile haul. We bale in a circle because all we have is pivots and don't mess with accumulators.

Nowadays, assuming you have quality it's easy to sell 1 ton bales. It was tough 15-20 years ago. Big bales load easy, unload easy and haul easy. Dairymen won't get bad back comp. claims and have been innovative developing different ways to feed them. I believe they retain more leaves and give us a larger baling window because they are easier on the hay. Also one operator can bale double what a conventional 3-tie baler can do. Big balers do require a little more management, but we have a very good hay crew with a few key employees who make the major calls.

In conclusion, I love 1 ton balers. We keep them inside always, clean them out and look for problems and wax them. Each baler will give you 30,000 tons easily before any major problems and we are looking for our tenth baler now.