I’m Nicky Baker, a fifth generation farmer from the Fredonia Valley’s area in Western Kentucky. My current farming operation consists of 65 acres alfalfa, 100 acres of row crops, (basically a corn, wheat, soybean double-crop rotation) and 2.5 acres of burley tobacco. I also have a 50 cow beef herd.

I remember having alfalfa on our farm before the weevil days of the ’60’s caused farmers to stop growing it. In those days, most of the farms had alfalfa and the majority of them had dairy cattle. The grain explosion of the ’70’s further curtailed alfalfa acreage, thereby providing an opportunity for a new market (at least to our area) of cash alfalfa hay. I started selling cash hay in 1976 or 1977 and have increased my hay production gradually since. Simply, the more alfalfa I produce, the less tobacco I raise.

I’m optimistic on alfalfa for several reasons. More people are buying hay instead of putting it up themselves, especially dairies. Forage testing has enabled buyers and sellers to speak the same language. Alfalfa makes the 1995 Farm Bill a lot easier to live with. It gives you more freedom and flexibility and less governmental control than with row crops. Beef cattle and alfalfa work great together, both as an outlet for low quality hay and grazing. Cattle are also the best defense against the alfalfa weevil.

Currently, I have an alfalfa/orchardgrass mixed stand. I have had straight alfalfa stands in the past but like the grass mixture better. The grass helps tonnage and aids curing. I use a Brillion seeder to seed 16-17# alfalfa and 3-5# orchardgrass. I normally get 5-6 years from a stand.

Green hay gets made with green equipment. I cut with a John Deere haybine with chevron rollers, followed by a Kuhn tedder, usually the next morning. Upon curing, I pull a double rake hitch. Based upon mine and my neighbor’s experiences, I would recommend the right hand/left hand rake setup over two right hand rakes. The latter leaves a tight windrow, almost like rolling up a rope. I bale with a John Deere 327 baler equipped with a 2" diameter spear (11" long total with 3" taper) on the plunger, a Lightning B bale chamber moisture meter and 170# test plastic twine. The hay is picked up with a New Holland stack wagon and stacked in an open-sided shed or sold out of the field. About 50% is sold out of the field.

I don’t use preservatives and I roll any badly rained on hay. Johnsongrass presents a problem. I prefer an intensive cutting schedule and heavy culling over high chemical bills.
Selling hay out of the field is a hassle and can be a nightmare. Producers often say, "When it comes out of the baler, it's their hay." Forget that, it's their hay when they pay for it. You can't force them to take wet hay and keep them as a customer. I sell a lot of pickup loads of hay, this lets smaller horse hay buyers pick up their own hay. I also arrange hauling locally, especially for steady customers. I have a three-point hitch "wall" that allows us to take the stack wagon and build a stack of hay outside. Then using a hay fork on a loader, semi-trailers can be more easily loaded out of the field. Sometimes customers will drop their gooseneck trailer off at the field, we load it, pull it in the barn, call them and they get it at their convenience.

The reason I sell out of the field is CASH FLOW. A "bird in the hand" so to speak. Basically, the decision to sell out of the field or store it in the barn boils down to greed and need. "I need the money now, but I might get more later". Everyone answers that question a little differently.

The remainder of the hay that goes to the barn gets the "Sell the best, feed the rest" treatment. I test it and list it with the KPHGA. That way I know the money is guaranteed. I really don't like to sell to horse hay buyers, sight unseen. Actually, I find the dairy market easier to deal with. Often, after culling for the horse market, the dairy market will net the most money.

Over the years I've established a few rules to live by. If I can't get $1.50 a bale, I feed it. I don't guarantee hay out of the field for anything, if they don't like it, don't pick it up. I don't wait on buyers to pick up hay if the stack wagon can get it. I make unknown buyers sign a disclaimer with receipt. This results from a threatened law suit over 72 bales of hay. These people were new to the horse business and didn't know hay would go through a "sweat".

A little advise that I would like to pass on is, don't limit yourself to one particular market. Don't let a buyer high pressure you, if he could get that kind of hay somewhere else, he wouldn't be at your barn. Get your money guaranteed and the best and about only way, is to sell through the KPHGA.