How I Produce and Market Alfalfa Hay

John Nowak
Hay Producer
Pembroke, KY

John Nowak was born March 22, 1947, in New York City and was raised in Westchester County, just north of New York City. After graduating from Colorado State University with a B.S. degree in farm and ranch management, he entered the U.S. Army. John served on active duty from 1969 until 1978. In 1975, his Army career brought him to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and he began farming part-time in Christian County in 1976. As with many "start-from-scratch" farmers, John’s first farming efforts involved producing burley tobacco during the years 1976 through 1979. In 1979, he began a cow-calf and backgrounding operation, and sold calves in the first Hopkinsville CPH (Certified Preconditioned for Health) feeder calf sale.

In 1982, John started his cash hay business. He sold hay that he produced and also put up hay for others on a custom basis. Since the mid-80’s, hay has been the central focus of the Nowak operation, but he sometimes feeds some calves as an outlet for hay not suitable for cash sale. The hay business moved up to another level in 1988 with the creation of the Kentucky Hay Exchange. To go along with a new business name, John built a large (50,000 bale) hay barn in Pembroke, KY to use as a centralized location for the storage and shipping of hay in the cash market. The barn burned in late 1990, and since then John has adopted a unique decentralized storage system.

John and his wife Agatha, have 7 children ranging from 16 to 30 years of age. His youngest two, Lindsey (age 16) and J.R. (age 17) are still at home and are very active in the hay operation in the summer months. The Nowak children are the only employees of the hay business.

John has been very active in organizations devoted to progress in agriculture and education. He is a member and past-president of the Christian County Agribusiness Association and a member of the Pembroke Ruritans. He currently serves on the Christian County Extension Council and has served as its president. He began serving on the Christian County Board of Education in 1997, representing the people of the northern and eastern sections of the county. He served on the original KERA Site-Based Council (1992-94) that governs the Hopkinsville Middle School, and played a leading role in formulating discipline policies and good-behavior incentive programs for the school.
John is a recognized leader in quality alfalfa hay production. In 1991, he received the Kentucky Forage and Grasslands Council's Grass Roots Award. He has helped many people learn about growing and marketing alfalfa through his role as a speaker at several conferences and tours, and by being the subject of several magazine articles, etc. He is also an alfalfa promoter—encouraging people to give alfalfa a try (as opposed to grain crops, etc.) and offering to help them learn to grow and manage it.

John was active in the creation and operation of the Christian County Hay Growers Association (CCHGA) and the Kentucky Pride Hay Growers Association (KPHGA), both of which were organized to promote the production, harvest, and sale of quality hay, and especially alfalfa. He served as president of the KPHGA, and was on its board of directors for several years. He is a definite proponent of hay testing, and all of his alfalfa is quality tested through the Kentucky Department of Agriculture program.

He has most recently been featured in the Ford-New Holland Magazine in 1996, and Hay & Forage Grower in March 1997. John gave a talk about his innovative marketing efforts at the Governor’s Kentucky Agricultural Leadership Summit. He has frequently participated in the hay quality contests held in conjunction with the Kentucky Alfalfa Conference and has won a first place in either the alfalfa or alfalfa-grass category each year. In 1994, he entered hay in the American Forage and Grassland Council’s contest, placing first in the alfalfa-grass category and was Reserve Grand Champion of the entire show. He was honored in 1997 by the National Alfalfa Council with the Prestigious National Producer Award.

Hay is a primary enterprise of the Nowak farming operation. He currently harvests between 100 and 150 acres of alfalfa and over 1,000 acres of grass or mixed hay each year. He is very particular about how he handles alfalfa because he wants high quality hay, and it’s not easy to put up quality alfalfa under Kentucky’s climatic conditions. Alfalfa haymaking is typically a four-day process for John. His unique hay curing methods (outlined below) were the feature of an article in the March 1997 issue of Hay and Forage Grower magazine. John’s goal is not only to put up alfalfa hay that has high nutritional quality, but one that looks, smells, and feels good both to livestock and livestock owners.

On Day One, John cuts the alfalfa, but waits until all of the dew has evaporated (usually after lunch) to prevent bleaching. For the first cutting (and for other cuttings when the ground is wet), the hay is highly windrowed behind the mower-conditioner because he feels that hay won’t cure properly laying on wet ground.

The alfalfa is left in the windrow to cure on Day Two.
On Day Three, the hay is tedded early in the day while there is still plenty of dew on it. Again, John feels like this helps to prevent bleaching. The alfalfa is raked late in the evening of Day Three or in the morning of Day Four, so that the order (moisture) in the crop will reduce leaf loss.

Finally, the alfalfa is baled in the evening of Day Four when the order is high enough to reduce shattering of leaves.

Most alfalfa and alfalfa/grass is square-baled and is picked up and put into barns using a New Holland 1069 self-propelled bale wagon. John’s alfalfa goes mostly to dairymen as the foundation for their rations, and his alfalfa/grass mixtures are the basis of his trade with horse owners.

John Nowak’s farming operation is unique for a variety of reasons:

(1) John didn’t come from a farm background. He started farming part-time and worked his way into it.

(2) John owns no farmland. He grows alfalfa on rented ground and in a variety of partnership arrangements.

(3) He subcontracts all of the square baling to another may because it lets him concentrate on handling hay to produce high quality during the curing process.

(4) John does a variety of custom haying activities for cash or on shares—doing all or part of the work needed to get hay cut and/or put up.

(5) He tries unique things and finds unique markets, such as growing Aroostic rye strictly for straw production.

(6) He is an excellent marketer because

(a) he knows the quality of his hay,

(b) he knows his customers and what they want, and

(c) he knows his customers’ animals and the kind of hay they need to perform well.

Sometimes he will sell a field of hay on the day that he cuts it, even though it may not be delivered to the customer for 6 months or more. John also acts as a hay broker, buying hay and reselling it or selling it for the owner on a cash or share basis.