

When weather doesn't cooperate – Which fields do I cut first?

Dennis Wright
Logan County

Biographical Information

Dennis Wright is a commercial alfalfa and grass hay producer on the border of Logan and Simpson County. He and his wife LeAnn, have been married for 32 years and have 3 children. Dennis and his two sons farm together on their 400 acre farm where 100 acres is dedicated to hay production. Dennis's first commercial hay crop was in 1999 and continues to grow. Of the 100 hay acres, 80 acres is alfalfa and the remaining 20 acres is top quality grass hay. The majority of his hay is marketed and sold in Georgia where he has found a secondary market in pine straw.

Dennis is a long-time supporter and attendee of the Annual Alfalfa Conference, and has only missed one year to attend a hay baling school out of state. His wife LeAnn jokes that the day of the Alfalfa Conference is the most important day of the year to Dennis. Dennis has been and continues to be a great supporter of the Extension Service and serves as a great ambassador for forage programs, even encouraging new producers to become more involved. When asked how he became a part of the alfalfa family, Dennis recalls, "Small farmers have had to find a niche market to help support their families, and alfalfa has been ours."

How I manage my hay operation

I along with my son, Wesley, farm about 450 acres in southwest Simpson/south east Logan counties on the TN state line. Wesley has taken over the row crop farming which consists of 200 acres wheat/double crop beans, 50 acres full season beans and 100 acres of corn. I currently grow about 80 acres of alfalfa and 25 acres of grass hay and handle about 25,000 bales of wheat straw. All small square bales. I also sell about 30 semi loads of pine needles.

I've been growing alfalfa for 21 years. I grew up on a row crop/tobacco farm. My father did not like the hay business, but when I was young, we baled wheat straw and my grandfather was into hay hauling. I had always wanted to try hay, for some crazy reason it has always appealed to me. In 1988 I started back baling straw when I got out of college. It was the only avenue back into farming due to the farming crash of the 80's. I worked at an equipment company in Nashville running the rental department. I handed out cards to all customers. I had a 1987 Ford Ranger on which I could haul 34 bales of straw. I took a load to work almost every day. Since I already had all the necessary equipment, moving to hay was the next logical step so I planted 10 acres of alfalfa in 1999. I didn't really know much about alfalfa at the time, but thought it would be the easiest to sell.

I am currently growing pure alfalfa. I haven't had much luck with the mixes. The grass I bale is just common mixed grass that I get off of waterways and neighbors 5 acre lots. Last year we baled 5000 bales off of 25 acres of ground. Our average land cost on that was \$30/acre.

The primary equipment I use is a 9' discbine, a V-rake, square baler and a stack wagon. Most of the time I have the field cut by noon the 1st day, it dries the 2nd day and I start baling about noon the 3rd day and have it picked up by nightfall. The majority of my alfalfa goes to horse farms in Georgia. While quality is a factor, my clientele is more focused on good hay at a good price and, of course, they want it green. I have found that this combination works pretty well to preserve the color. I don't use preservatives. I have tried them, but they just never fit my program.

For us, spring hay harvest starts at green up with application of herbicides and insecticides. Then we service the mowers and bale wagons. I send my balers out to my baler guy when we finish in the fall. He is less pushed then and gives the balers a good going over and makes any needed repairs. We wash and wax our balers. This helps when it comes to blowing off the dust when servicing them in season and greatly improves their appearance at trade in.

When it's time for the first cutting I just wing it based on the conditions. I have a few different plays I throw at it. I have 6 fields, ranging in size from 8 acres to 20 acres. If I can get some decent weather in April or early May, I'll cut a field or two and wrap it for haylage. The goal is not so much the hay as it is to get the second cutting started growing.

Next, since the weather is usually still crappy, I will target one of the 8-acre fields if there is a small weather window. This way if I lose the gamble, I don't lose too much. If the weatherman is still saying good things, I may cut the other 8-acre field. If the forecast is unusually dry, I'll go all out and cut a big field rather than the small ones.

My main objective with the first cutting is to get the next five cuttings on some sort of decent rotation. Theoretically we should be cutting hay every 5 days from May to October. So, we cut on Monday, watch it dry on Tuesday, bale it and put it in the barn on Wednesday, clean and service the equipment on Thursday and then go fishing on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. If you believe that, I've got some land for sale in Arizona.

Of course, conditions are never that good in Kentucky. So, we always have a backup plan. My first line of defense is that over mature hay is still worth more than wet hay. So, we wait. I have waited as much as 10 or 15 days and still get decent hay as long as I handle it right. Remember, they just want it green. I have recently started planting low- lignin alfalfa. The plant doesn't become stemmy if it stands too long. Seems to be holding very well in the field.

My second line of defense is to cut small quantities during iffy weather windows. This is why I have the different size fields. You can do this by cutting half of a field or some portion, but I hate to have a field at two different growth stages. It's a mess all year. I have two 8-acre

fields, a 10-acre field and a 12-acre field. At least one of these is always ready for cutting. If the weather is very good, I just cut more than one field.

My 3rd line of defense is extra capacity. We are very over-equipped. At least that's what my accountant says. I got a lot of iron for an operation this size. I have 3 hay mowers, 5 hay rakes, 3 hay balers, and 2 bale wagons. And that's not including what I can borrow from neighbors. I run at about 50% capacity in normal conditions. We normally cut about 15 acres and have it all on the ground by noon. I don't cut hay in the afternoon. But if things get really bad, I can knock down the entire 80 acres in one day. I've had to do that once in 20 years. But, more realistically, I may cut as much as 40. I can run 2 mowers, a couple of rakes, both square balers and both bale wagons and get it done in a hurry.

The 4th and final solution to bad weather hay is cows. If you grow hay, you better have cows. I don't really like cattle, but I've got 6 cows and a few feeders just for the sole purpose of hay "garbage disposals". Damaged hay isn't totally junk, but not many people are going to buy it. Horse, dairy and even goat people want quality and a beef producer in Kentucky won't touch a small square bale even if you paid him to take it. So, you got to have something to do with your damaged and culled hay.

Sometimes you'll get lucky and get away with a mess. Like the year I bought 30 acres of standing alfalfa from a neighbor. It had a little rye grass in it. I did not know then how quickly rye grass turned yellow. There was probably less than 20% in the hay, but every bale looked like a bale of straw. (Remember, they like it green) As we were finishing it up I was wondering what I was going to do with this mess. The land owner said we could put it in his barn, so that was the plan. While we were picking it up, one of my best customers called and said he really needed some alfalfa. I told him I didn't have any this early in the year, except I've got this with a little rye grass in it. I told him, "now it yellow and I mean yellow, but young rye grass is good hay", but I gave him a good discount so he said bring it on. When I got there, (Perry, GA) he was shocked at how yellow it was. We unloaded and went on our way. Two days later he called back, "hey, you got any more of that yellow hay, they love it down here". He is retired now, but still talks about the yellow hay whenever I see him.

My cows have saved my butt more than once. One year I had a beautiful stand of hay in November. Over knee high and the forecast was for 10 days of dry weather. I know it is hard to cure hay in November, but 10 days in the 70's should do it. So, I cut it. Five days in, they changed the forecast. Long story short, the boys and I were out there on Thanksgiving Day baling wet alfalfa (Maybe that's why Father Farms Alone, or could be the time we took down tobacco on Christmas Day). One thousand bales stacked in the barn at 20-25% moisture. A few days later we un-stacked it and sorted out the wet and hot bales and "salted" them, then restacked it. The boys thought that was a lot of fun also. But I bought thirty 500-pound steers and fed them that moldy, salty hay and they licked it right up. I fed them the entire batch and they gained about 200 pounds by spring. I really came out on that deal.

My advice to anyone wanting to produce any kind of hay is to identify your market first. Then develop a program to exploit that market. I have very good customers. They leave me signed blank checks in the stable and they don't complain, but they will only pay so much for hay. They will not pay more no matter how good it is. I cannot sell my very best hay (200+RFV, 22+ CP) for any more than I can sell my average hay for. So I don't strive for that top notch hay every cutting. Identify your market, find out what the customer wants and then provide a quality product at a fair price. I have picked up two co-ops that buy all my grass hay because I provide a consistent supply and a tight bale. And when I say program, I mean the entire operation. My "program" is Alfalfa, grass, straw, pine straw. They all use the same equipment. The pine straw back haul permits me to be competitive in a market where otherwise I would not be. Anyone can with a brain and good credit can grow hay. You have to be willing provide something the other guy doesn't. Discover your uniqueness and learn to exploit it in the service of others... And remember, "They like it green."

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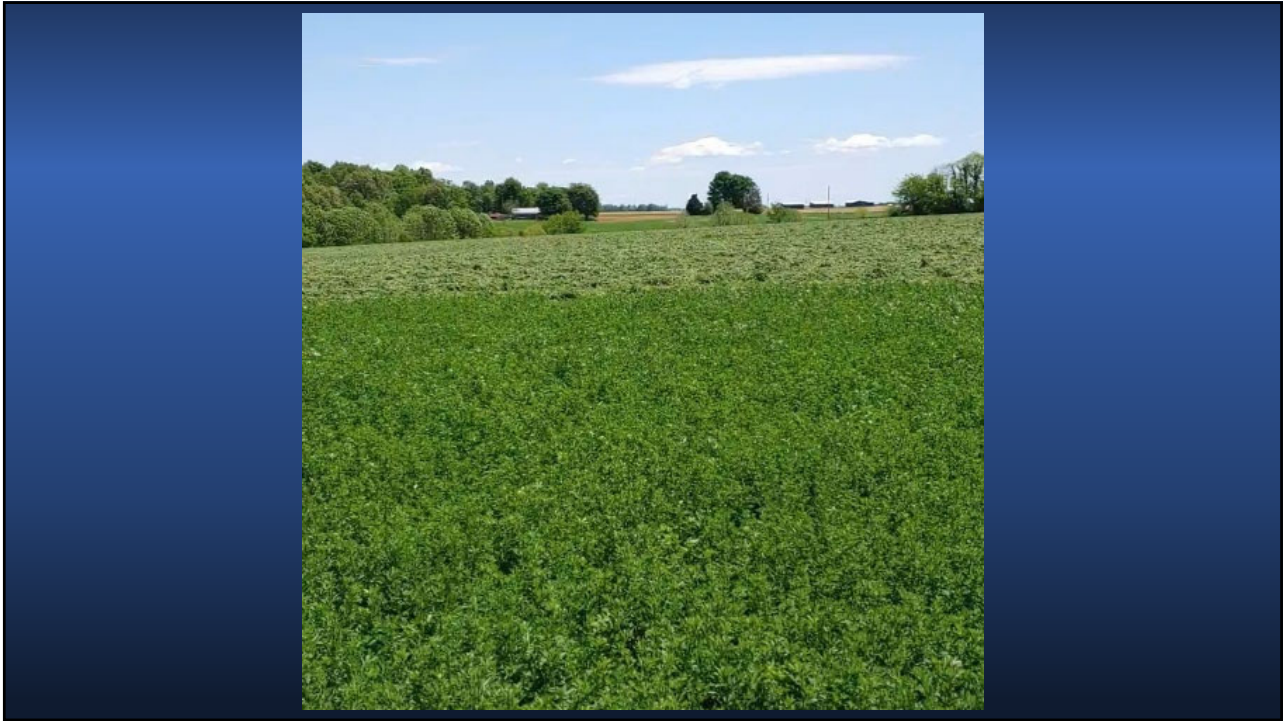


Dennis Wright, Logan County





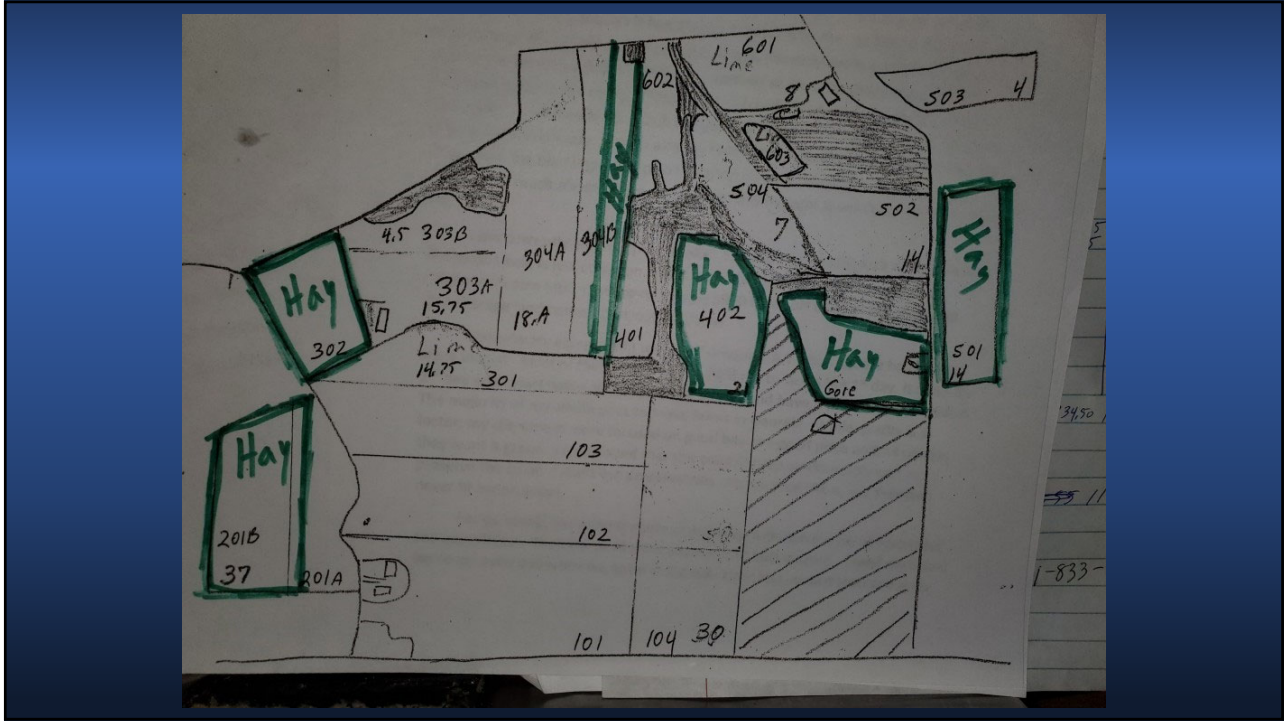
























Brad Hines, his wife Karen, son Rylan, and daughter Kaylee operate a very diverse forage and grazing operation in northern Hart County. Their operation specializes in small square alfalfa/orchardgrass mixes on about 400 acres and timothy/orchardgrass on 100 acres. They have 300 acres of pasture for grazing fall calving cows. Several hay fields are used for grazing after one cutting of hay. Rotational grazing practices are implemented during the growing season. They also grow corn, wheat and soybeans on rented farmland. Wheat and rye are planted in the fall for grain and straw production. Seed is kept from wheat and sold for cover cropping to neighbors and retail stores. Half the grain crop acres are put into wheat or cover crops each year. Brad still produces 50 acres of burley tobacco for a cash crop. They have utilized NRCS funds to fence off streams and woodlands, and to install feeding pads because their land is at the mouth of Bacon Creek. Calves are sold off the cow in late spring or early summer before hot weather sets in. They are producing about 50,000 square hay bales which are primarily sold to Florida markets, 10,000 wheat straw bales for the Lexington market, and 1,000 grass hay round bales for local sales and for their cows.

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Brad Hines, Hart County



My Family

- I married my wife, Karen in 2008. She works full-time as a registered nurse
- I have two children; Rylan is age 7 and Kaylee is 4
- We live in Magnolia, Kentucky on our beef cattle, tobacco, hay and grain operation
- We love spending time together on the farm and being able to raise our children on the farm, so they can experience the childhood we did
- Family is important. I am grateful for the blessings God has given me in my life and my farming operation.

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The Farm

- We have a very diverse forage and grazing operation
- Our farm land is located in Northern Hart County
- Specializing in small square Alfalfa/orchard grass mixes and timothy/orchard grass
- We are utilizing rotational grazing for our fall calving cow herd
- We also grow corn, wheat, and soybeans on rented ground
- Wheat and rye are planted in the fall for grain and straw production
- Alfalfa sales are in Florida, straw bales are sent to Lexington
- Burley tobacco remains a cash crop on our farm

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Growing into my Current Operation

- I got into the cash hay sales because my neighbor wanted me to put his farm into alfalfa for white tail deer attraction
- In 2012, we had extreme drought conditions, I chose to chop the corn that was originally planted for grain production. We made corn silage for the beef cattle
- This was my opportunity to plant alfalfa in August....Then it begins

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Hay Crops

- Forage of choice has been alfalfa/orchard grass mixes
- Main sales are in Georgia and Florida
- The best method for this operation is Round-up ready alfalfa for 1 or 2 years then add orchard grass in the fall (August or September) No-till
- We utilize a JD 750 wheat drill for planting No-till
- Timothy is also a valuable cash crop
- The timothy is planted after burley tobacco production
- We can harvest 2-3 years of small squares from one field before rotating into another crop



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Equipment



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Getting Started in Spring

- We monitor the hay fields in the Spring to decide which ones to cut first
- I have noticed different soil types and age of crop stands will bloom out at different times
- Prioritize cuttings by laying down only what can be baled in one day
- The most mature will be cut first
- Some of the first cuttings will be cut earlier to help with the workload
- We can watch for orchard grass heads and alfalfa blooms to cut before it is too late



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Mature Hay is Worth More than Wet Hay

- Weather doesn't cooperate every time
- We produce round bales for cattle with lower quality forage, when it doesn't get cut on time and gets ripe
- We also round bale high moisture forage then wrap in plastic
- If rain is coming and there isn't enough sunshine or humidity is high, we can make cattle feed



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Cut Small Quantities During Iffy Weather

- Some hay baling decisions doesn't work out
- We can wait and hope for better weather, but it doesn't always come
- I have left hay and hoped it would dry and then rolled hay, cows wouldn't eat
- So, it's good to have a plan because it can turn to straw if left out one day to many
- Making hay requires manpower and equipment



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Making the Best of Challenging Weather

- The challenge is working around the weather
- Late in the year with the 3rd and 4th cuttings, I have left hay out for a week before it would dry
- I didn't think it would work, but we use the hay tedder every day or rake it, then turn it over the next day—sometimes it does finally dry
- Due to uncertain weather conditions, I have cut hay when it's wet to gain time



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Advice

- Advice I would give in one word is **QUALITY**
- I know producers that you can back up to their barn and almost never find a moldy bale
- The market is driven on Quality
- If you can get the forage harvested with a **GOOD** color, smell, and bale weights---
---The Hay will sale its self
- If you can build a reputation on quality hay, then you can get the premium price you deserve
- Hay production takes patience, passion, and determination for producing quality hay for the customer

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Thank You!



**IF YOU HAVE THE DRIVE AND DETERMINATION TO
PRODUCE QUALITY HAY- ---YOU CAN!**

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Clayton Gerald

Clayton Gerald along with his son Chris and their family operate cash hay farm in Hart County Kentucky specializes on producing small square bales for the Southeastern horse hay market. Clayton is an articulate spokesperson and leader in forages, especially where hay is concerned. He has been on the board of the National Hay Association (NHA) for the past 10 years and is currently their second vice-President. He has also been a board member for the American Forage and Grassland Council from 2-13 through 2018. Clayton is currently the past President of the Kentucky Forage and Grassland Association where he is a long serving member of the board. Clayton is a former winner of the Kentucky Forage and Grassland Council Forage Spokesperson Contest and is a long-term sponsor of a hay quality identification contest at the annual meeting of the American Forage and Grassland Council. As a speaker, Clayton is much in demand and has spoken at numerous state, regional and national meetings regarding the making of quality hay.

Geralds Farms Munfordville, Kentucky



340 Alfalfa
580 Mix
120 Timothy















