

# Looking Back on Summer 2003

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2003 was a good year for this dairyman with his grazing program but presented many challenges in making quality hay for his fifty-cow dairy herd. Rains kept pastures and hay fields growing, but they also made harvesting dry hay very difficult.

I also decided to experiment with sorghum sudangrass as a pasture supplement. With the 2002 drought affecting pasture availability, I was seeking some alternative for my permanent pasture, if needed. Again, rain played a pivotal role in the results.

Making dry hay from first cutting is often difficult in the Midwest, but this past year it was, at times, impossible to do so in a timely manner. Out of frustration at not being able to put three dry days together and after losing one field of hay in the attempt, I decided to custom hire an individual with an in-line bale stretch wrapper to wrap my next field of round bales in polyfilm in a long continuous tube. Moisture in the hay ran at 40-50%. The tube consisted of eighty bales positioned on the edge of the field.

I was impressed with the speed of making the tube. It took only 1 1/2 hours to wrap the eighty bales. However, the purchase price of \$20,000 for the wrapper dampened my enthusiasm for this potential solution. It was proof for me though, that a bale wrapping system was a viable option for getting my hay made in a quality manner.

A neighbor custom-hired to have his round bales wrapped individually. This seemed another possibility but as before, new, individual bale wrappers priced out at \$12,000 to \$17,000, again more than I wanted to invest. The alternative was to rent a wrapper or find a used one to buy. There was a person in my area that did custom bale wrapping and a phone call informed me he wanted to sell his machine. The price was right, and I was in business.

I wrapped about 100 bales this past summer, making good quality hay that otherwise would have gotten wet. It took longer to wrap the bales individually (3 minutes per bale) and the cost for stretch wrap was greater (\$3 per bale) because each end of the bale had to be wrapped. However, I had the advantage of being able to move the bales to more convenient storage areas for easier feeding later. Also, the tube being in a distant field, there was some varmint damage to the stretch film that required repairs. I did not have this problem with the individual bales moved closer in.

When the cows came off pasture this fall, it was time to start feeding the wrapped bales. The bales contained in the tube were of good quality except for the first two bales on either end, which had quite a bit of spoilage. The individually wrapped bales were also of good quality but without the end spoilage found in the tube. (This helped offset the extra cost of film wrap.) What was even more important, the cows ate the hay well and milk production remained steady. Normally the cows tend to drop in production when coming off pasture.

From this experience I believe that individually wrapped bales of high moisture hay work best for the size of my herd. There is more convenience and control at feeding time with only the bales needed being opened. Also, it isn't necessary to bale a huge number of round bales to cut back on spoilage. I could do a field of ten or twenty bales without fear of added waste.

As for the sorghum sudangrass trial, the mostly plentiful rains this summer muted the need for a pasture alternative. With all the moisture, I had an excess of good grass in my permanent paddocks to manage. If only one could know the weather ahead of time. Not knowing, I seeded five acres of brown midrib sorghum sudangrass on June 2nd. This variety was chosen based on palatability and digestibility. It grew well, but by early July, I still couldn't turn cows out to pasture it because of muddy conditions. Besides, I had all the pasture grass I needed.

Not wanting to see the sorghum go to waste, I cut, baled and stretch wrapped it. My round baler didn't handle the job well because of the high moisture content so it was a slow process. I did finally graze the sorghum sudangrass a couple of times before first frost. It was not as appealing to my milk cows as regular pasture grass. Cost of production probably equaled income earned, and there was more work involved than managing permanent pasture. Maybe a dry summer would have changed ratios and my opinion of sorghum sudangrass but I don't think I'll be planting any next year.

The year 2003 is in the books. It provided challenges and opportunities for learning and honing management skills for my grazing program. That's a good year.