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Way back in the early part of the summer I started getting the calls coming in about how much are "large round bales" worth? How can I answer that? What is a "large round bale" by definition? With the amount of hay that was produced in the Southern Ohio this year the value of rounds bales is most likely not going to be as high as it has been in recent years. However, that could change some, as several people have started feeding some hay due to the dry conditions that have suppressed pastures in the past several weeks. I have also had some calls from people who have straw for sale in the past few days, so I thought we might revisit a few thoughts on buying and selling bales of hay or straw.

I put this article together several years ago, but the points are still true today when it comes to evaluating bales of hay, or in some instances straw. This year some hay was put up very timely, while some was way over mature. Hopefully this will help you know what you are buying or selling.

Regardless if it is the local classifieds, agricultural publications or local radio call-in buy and sell, you often see or hear the advertisement as just that, large round bales for sale, so let's see what we know about large round bales. First of all a large round bale could be defined, as far as dimensions are concerned, as any of the following sizes, if you check with farm machinery dealerships literature on balers. These of course are expressed in approximate feet: 4 x 4, 4 x 5, 4 x 6, 5 x 4, 5 x 5, and 5 x 6. Six different sizes of bales that all would be classified as a large round bale. If you look further into the literature you will find that the approximate weight for bales in each of the mentioned dimensions are also listed, or at least a range. If you compare the weights you will find that there are some big differences in what a large round bale is. You can argue the weights, but they are all estimated by the same people, so for comparison, they should be good.

The 4 x 4 bale will average maybe in the neighborhood of 700 pounds, but this depends on the type of hay put in the bale, too. Finer hay like second cutting orchardgrass or alfalfa will have more hay that long stem first cutting grass hay. This will be the same for all sizes of large round bales.



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So, a 4 x 4 bale is approximately 700 pounds, and 4 x 5 or 5 x 4 will weigh on average around 1000 pounds and a 4 x 6 or 5 x 5 may get up to around 1400 pounds on average. That would mean a 4x6 bale will have twice as much hay in it as a 4 x 4 bale if these weight averages are accurate. Then you look at a 5 x 6 that will average in the neighborhood of 1800 pounds. That means a 5 x 6 bale is more than 2.5 times as much hay as a 4 x 4 bale. But it is worth considering if you are buying or selling hay. Compare apples to apples, not apples to oranges.

Ok, we have now established that we have some big differences in the amount of hay large round bales depending on the size. What other differences should be factors in establishing the price or value of a large round bale (or any hay)? Here are some more things to think about as we decide what hay might be worth.

What is it? Just because it has been put into a baler, it is round and either is bound by twine or net wrap, does not necessarily make it hay or even feed. If it is going to be used as feed it needs to have nutritional value. Back in 2007, when hay was short, producers were rolling up corn stalks, soybean stubble, and anything they could to try to make it through the winter. We use several things that have various qualities when it comes to forages for hay. Some of the more common forages include orchardgrass, fescue, timothy, clover and alfalfa. The feed value of these is not the same in fact they can vary greatly for different things that animals may require like protein, energy, fiber and more. Corn stalks and soybean stubble have plenty of fiber, but not much more.

The quality is something else to consider when looking at the forages that make up the round bale. All alfalfa or all orchardgrass is not the same. Depending on how mature it was when it was cut will greatly affect the quality of the hay in the bale, plus other issues like if the hay was cured and dry when it was baled, or if it was rained on after it was cut. The problem most producers are facing now is the fact that we have had too much rain for hay to be harvested without these issues. The quality continues to diminish on much of the crop and the weather is not being cooperative. When it comes to quality there are several things that you can do when inspecting hay in addition to pulling a sample and sending it to a lab to have it tested. Here are some things that you can do while looking at the hay to get an idea about quality. Try to establish the Stage of Maturity, the Leafiness, the Color, the Odor and Condition, and look for Foreign Material. A good fact sheet from the University of Maryland discusses these in detail and even gives you a chart to rank and score hay based on what you see. The fact sheet can be found at https://extension.umd.edu/sites/default/files/docs/programs/4-H/resources/animal_science/FS644.pdf or contact your local Extension office for

information.

The last thing that should be checked out and considered when estimating the value of a large round bale is the storage. Round bales were designed to be stored outside and shed water. However, this is not without the loss of hay, so there are several things that can be factors in the amount of hay loss you may be looking at. Round bales stored inside will have the least decay. Bales stored outside on a raised area with gravel under them will reduce the amount of decay on the bottom of bales versus bales stored on the ground. Even hay on the ground will have less decay if it is elevated so water can get away from the hay that is actually touching the ground. Stacking hay outside that is not covered will have losses where the hay touches because the water is trapped there. Keep in mind that if you have a few inches of decay on the top of the bale, or maybe even more on the bottom of the bale, the amount of hay, or the percentage of hay lost is in relation to the size of the bale.

There is no exact science to putting a value on a round bale, but these things should help establish a fair price for both the buyer and the seller. Hopefully these points will also help make fair comparisons when it comes to the size of the bales, the quality of the hay and the amount of dry matter that can be consumed by the livestock that will be eating the hay.

The one factor that I did not mention above that always comes into play is basic economics. Supply and demand will always have an influence on the value of anything, and large round bales are not exempt from that. When hay is in short supply the price will be higher than when everyone has plenty of hay to feed and there are very few looking to buy. Even when we have extremes of these situations, it is a good idea to compare what you are getting for your money.