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Buying or Selling Hay by the Bale

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Many acreage owners either have hay for sale or they need to buy it for their horses or other livestock. Often this hay is sold or bought by the bale. Buying by the bale can lead to paying an amount that is too high to too low for the value of the hay.

Deciding on a fair price for a bale of hay can be difficult. Much of our hay is packaged and sold in big round bales. Large round bales differ greatly in size and quality and those differences must be considered when establishing a fair price.

Bale Size and Weight

Bale weight and nutrient content are critical factors in determining the value of a given bale. Bale weight affects, not only the amount of hay being bought or sold, but also the cost of feeding and transporting it. To accurately compare the value of different bales- including their transportation and feeding costs – you will need to know their size, weight and density.

Round bales are generally described in width x diameter measurements, or by height. Round bales come in six sizes ranging from 4 ft. x 4 ft. to 5 ft. x 6 ft.

A 4 x 4 bale weighs, on average, about 700 pounds, but the exact weight depends on the type of hay. A bale of finer cut hay, like second cutting alfalfa, will weigh more hay than a long-stem, first cutting grass hay.

- 4 x 4 bales average 700 lbs.
- 4 x 5 (or 5 x 4) bales average 1,000 lbs.
- 4 x 6 or 5 x 5 bales average 1,400 lbs.

Often the hay seller may think they know the weight of their bales, but it is rare that anyone actually knows unless they have a scale receipt or other verification of the weight.

The best way to know the true weight of a bale is to weigh it on a scale. Grain elevators, feed cooperatives, or truck stops with scales are possibilities for getting hay bales weighed. If actual weights are not available, then your only choice may be to estimate the average weight of the bales. [Bale Weight- How Important Is It?](#) is an excellent resource written by Jason Banta, Texas A & M Beef Specialist, and give guidelines for estimating bale weight.

Bale Nutrient Content

Nutrient content can be determined in a lab with a forage quality test. If possible, ask the seller for a test report. If a test report is not available, then look closely at the hay and try to determine its:

- stage of maturity,
- leafiness,
- color,
- odor,
- and the amount of foreign material present.

A University of Maryland fact sheet, [Evaluating Hay Quality](#), discusses those factors in detail and includes a chart to rank and score what you see.

Storage Loss

The last thing to check when evaluating the value or price of a large round bale is storage loss. Look to see how much of the bale is weathered or decayed. Keep in mind that if you have a few inches of decay on the top of the bale, and maybe even more on the bottom of the bale, that the percentage of hay lost is in relation to the size of the bale.

Of course, knowing the quality and quantity of hay you are purchasing is only the first step toward coming up with a fair price. Knowing what hay is selling for and how much nutrient value that a hay lot will provide is the key to settling on the right price.