



WELLINGTON FARMER Don Applegate's Hay-to-Go business supplies small packages of high-quality hay to retailers throughout the Midwest.

Package payoff

By BILL SPIEGEL

DON Applegate's inspiration came from seeing dozens of shrink-wrapped bundles of firewood for sale in front of his local convenience store. Wouldn't horse enthusiasts appreciate the convenience of high-quality hay in a small package?

As it turns out, his idea was spot on. Applegate's Hay-to-Go operation has shipped 11- to 18-pound string-tied and shrink-wrapped packages of alfalfa, straw, brome hay and prairie hay to dozens of retail outlets throughout Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and Oklahoma.

Growing market

"It's just kind of exploded into an unbelievable deal," says Applegate, who farms about 3,000 acres of wheat and row crops in Sumner County. After opening for business

Key Points

- Hay-to-Go repackages bulk hay into convenient bales.
- Don Applegate, Wellington farmer, started the company.
- Hay-to-Go processes more than 4,000 packages per day.

in November 2005, Hay-to-Go sold products at locally owned garden centers and lumberyards. Then, buyers from the farm-supply franchises Orschelns and Tractor Supply Co. became interested. Now, Applegate has tentative agreements with two major grocery store chains. More than 400 stores could carry Hay-to-Go products by this fall.

"We intended Hay-to-Go for women who may not want to handle heavy bales of alfalfa. They can easily handle a 20-pound package," Applegate explains. The idea quickly spread

to include other types of hay. "People in town have pets and gardens. They decorate with small bales of straw. They need small packages of hay."

Fitting a niche

Ideas, however, are nothing without action. Applegate first had to do market research and then develop a business plan for his local banker, who worked to obtain a Small Business Administration loan.

Applegate built an 80-by-200-foot processing plant on

the farmstead, employing never-before-used technology to break down big square bales of hay and re-size them with a modified small square baler. A shrink-wrap machine wraps each bale twice before a baking process removes moisture and seals the plastic. After that, an employee affixes a plastic handle to the package, which is then placed on a pallet.

In a typical day, more than 4,000 bales are packaged — one every six seconds.

Consumers are willing to pay

a premium price for packaging and sizes that are portable, quick to clean up and proportionally sized. A ton of wheat straw, Applegate says, is worth \$40 in the field. In Hay-to-Go packages, a retailer might sell that same ton of straw for more than \$1,000.

"That all has to do with retail packaging and marketing," Applegate says.

■ Learn how to cash in on convenient hay packages on Page 6.



The corn with the built-in bug zapper.

