

NWA Hay Dominance Challenged

Arkansas To Host National Hay Championships In May

BENTONVILLE, ARK.

The pastures of northwest Arkansas look serene enough, but beyond the cattle and the rolling, tree-covered hills are producers engaged in a fierce, but friendly, competition to continue growing the nation's best hay.

The venue is the Quality Forage program, begun in 1998 as a way to encourage Benton County producers to use best management

produce top-quality forage.

"The samples indicate that energy levels were edging closer to the value of corn, which had producers grinning from ear-to-ear.

"This is the first year of super-quality samples from several varieties. In addition to Greenfield, we had top quality results from Genesis, Ozark, Midland-99, Cherokee and Vaughns," he said.

ALL IN IT TOGETHER



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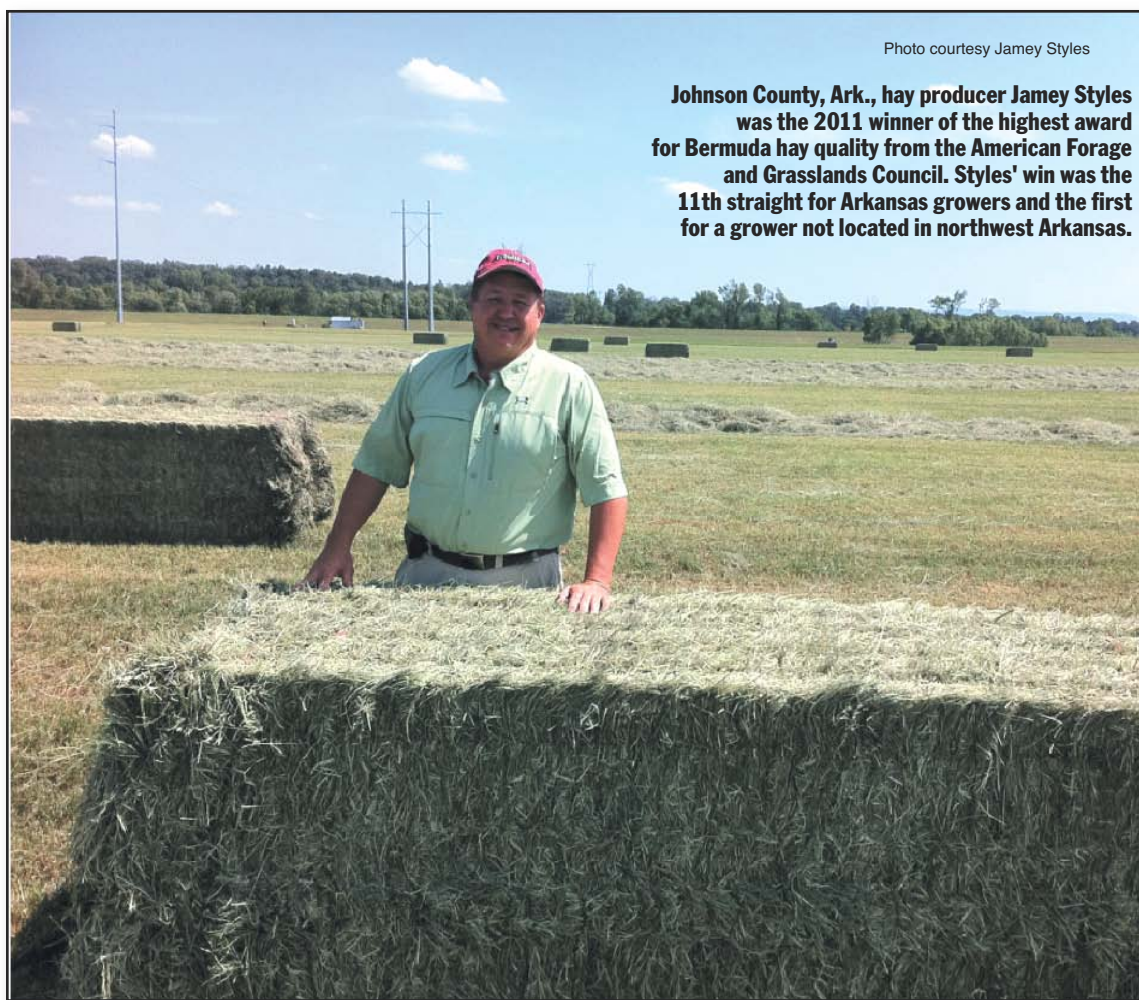


Photo courtesy Jamey Styles

Johnson County, Ark., hay producer Jamey Styles was the 2011 winner of the highest award for Bermuda hay quality from the American Forage and Grasslands Council. Styles' win was the 11th straight for Arkansas growers and the first for a grower not located in northwest Arkansas.

practices to grow high-quality Bermuda hay for area livestock. Each year, growers submit samples to be tested for crude protein, total digestible nutrients, relative feeding value, relative feed quality and color.

Top samples are sent on to what is essentially the national hay championships: the annual American Forage and Grassland Council conference. Arkansas' program has proven its worth, with state producers winning 11 straight Bermuda hay titles.

Robert Seay, Benton County extension staff chair for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, the driving force behind the program, said that in 2004, growers chose to open the program up to folks outside of Benton County after an Oklahoma producer asked to join.

"Our first national hay champion, Dennis Malone, said, 'we could learn as much from other growers as we can from looking at ourselves,'" Seay said.

TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

Even with the addition of hay producers from Oklahoma and Missouri, 10 national titles were won by northwest Arkansas growers.

However, 2011 was a year of change. Not only was the winner not from northwest Arkansas, but Jamey Styles also forsook the Greenfield variety of Bermudagrass that had won the previous titles. The Johnson County man's winning sample was a variety called Genesis.

Last year was a challenging one for hay producers. Drought in Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana meant short hay supplies there, creating a market for Arkansas hay until drought began sinking its teeth into much of Arkansas' south and west.

With tons of hay migrating off the farm, Seay said he had to "browbeat producers into keeping enough to sample for the contest."

Participants in the Quality Forage program gathered for their 14th annual meeting Feb. 25 to see how their samples fared against each other and to get caught up on the latest best practices.

"Even though the 2011 hay production year fell short on volume across most southern and Southwestern states, I was surprised when 90-plus Bermuda hay samples were entered in the annual Quality Forage program," he said. Despite short rainfall, the producers managed to



Tom Ritz works to unwrap a round bale in preparation for rebaling into squares at his farm near Gentry, Ark.

U of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture photo by Robert Seay

Seay admitted: "I've always noted that once producers from other locations fine-tuned their management practices, our glass house would be at risk. Actually, three of the entries for the national hay contest will come from beyond our borders."

What happens if the winner comes from Oklahoma or Missouri? "We'll just roll with the punches," he said with a laugh, adding that most of the growers have known each other for long time and wouldn't mind from much which side of the state or county line the winner hails.

At this year's state meeting, Styles and Tom Ritz, who farms near Gentry in Benton County, were named co-winners of the Grower of the Year Award.

THE PRESSURE IS ON

The pressure will be on Seay's group this year, since Arkansas will host this year's American Forage and Grasslands Field Tour and National Hay Show on May 17-18 at Rogers.

"With a dozen top quality entries from our area, I really pity the hay judge who has to make those decisions in May," he said.

To attend the event and pick up some pointers, individuals can register at the AFGC website, www.afgc.org and click on "Events".

Since the Quality Forage program began, the compilation of the 1,456 sample results make this one of the largest Bermuda hay data collections from a single commercial area in the U.S. For more information, Seay can be contacted at rseay@uaex.edu. △