

Rice Farmers Help Supply Rice Straw As Cattle Feed For Texas



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Texas rancher Allan Hardison, center, talks with rice farmers Paul Zaunbrecher, left, and Jerry Leonards about baling rice straw to be used for cattle feed. Texas has been hit with the worst droughts in the Lone Star State's history. Photo by Bruce Schultz

BATON ROUGE, LA.

Louisiana rice farmers are helping Texas ranchers by providing rice straw to be used as cattle feed in the drought-stricken Lone Star State. The Texans are baling the rice straw for hay and hauling it back to Texas.

Allan Hardison, who has a herd near Fredericksburg, Texas, has been in the area with a partner, Sofus Nielsen, with a crew and hay baling equipment after they got a call to get as much straw as he can from the farm of brothers Fred, Phillip and Paul Zaunbrecher near Rayne.

The Zaunbrechers aren't charging Hardison for the straw, but the way Paul Zaunbrecher sees it, Hardison is doing them a favor by removing dead straw that would hurt crawfish production. The decaying vegetation will rob the water of oxygen, stressing young crawfish, Paul Zaunbrecher explained. "This is going to help us a lot."

The Zaunbrechers know Hardison from deer hunting in Texas.

Hardison said the usual rainfall by this time in his area is around 25 inches, but so far the total is only 3.5 inches.

Hardison also farms corn and wheat but the drought took care of this year's crop. "We didn't even pull the combines out of the barn," he said.

Hardison said many ranchers have been forced to sell off their herds because pastures are barren from the drought, and they no longer can afford to provide feed.

"If you sell, you are out of business, and you lose a year's calf crop," he said.

Hardison custom-cuts hay, so he has managed to have a continuous supply.

"We've never stopped feeding since last fall," he said.

Hardison said some ranchers are getting alfalfa hay from Kansas, New Mexico, Nebraska and South Dakota, but the trucking costs are becoming more expensive.

Dr. Mike Strain, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry secretary, has relaxed load restrictions for hay being hauled on the highways. Officials will allow vehicles transporting round hay bales to be loaded side by side across trailers up to 12 feet wide and 14 feet high, but the loads must be off the highways after dark.

Vince Deshotel, LSU AgCenter county agent in St. Landry Parish, has been coordinating efforts to get Louisiana hay to Texas cattle ranchers. "There's still a demand for hay," he said.

Deshotels said he traveled to Texas recently and saw the devastating effects of the drought. "This isn't something that's going to go away soon," he said.

Rice straw's protein level is roughly 6 percent, compared to roughly 12 percent in good quality hay. By working into the night, they have been able to make as much as 320 bales a day.

Jerry Leonards, president of the Acadia Parish Rice Growers Association, said other farmers have helped by giving away rice straw providing labor and equipment.

"This has been a good chance to help our neighbors," Leonards said.

Ken Lyon custom-bales hay in the Crowley area. He said several farmers have provided rice straw for hay at no cost, and he and partner Aaron Melancon have been selling it to Texans for their regular price.

"One day it's going to start raining in Texas again, and we might need help from them," he said. △