

# Area Farmer Discovers New Market For Hay and Straw

By Randy Olson

Up until recently, Gary Organ of rural McLeansboro was a typical southern Illinois farmer. Organ Farms was established in 1945 by his grandparents. He and family members were involved in beef and swine production, and had also produced corn, soybeans, wheat, barley, rye and buckwheat.

Sixty-one years later, Organ Farms has transformed into a fast-growing hay and straw business that is selling to out-of-state accounts as well as the local market. "Now we want to expand the sales of all our products to other areas of the country," says Organ. The farm currently has about 100 acres of farmland devoted to the hay and straw business, and Organ expects to add another 15 acres this year.

The farm produces alfalfa hay, alfalfa grass mix, timothy and orchard grass. "People recognize the difference in the quality of our hay bales. They are tighter and greener than you can find anywhere else locally," said Organ. They also produce mini bales of hay for pets such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas.

The business is now producing about 15,000 square bales of straw per year. The farm's regular straw business serves the local residential market as well as large contractors and lawn and garden centers. They also produce mini bales of straw for decorative purposes, theme parties and table centerpieces. However, the unique production, packaging and marketing of barley straw is gaining the farm notoriety and business growth.

Barley straw has been used for centuries in Europe. Americans have only recently discovered its use as a safe, effective means of inhibiting new growth of algae in areas of water. Barley straw is effective in farm ponds, Koi ponds, golf course lakes and ponds, and any decorative body of water. It is also a great way to keep water tanks cleaner for livestock and horse operations, providing healthier water for your animals with less hassle. Barley straw should not harm fish or desired plants if used



properly. This enables you to control future algae growth without the use of copper sulfate, which often kills fish.

"Recent area stories in the news about accidental fish kills with copper sulfate have really raised the awareness and interest in barley straw," said Organ. "People can now enjoy a pond, control their algae and not harm the fish population."

It is important to note that barley straw does NOT kill or eliminate existing algae. It is really an effective means of inhibiting new algae growth. Therefore, barley straw works best when treatment is started in the spring before the water temperature reaches the lower 60s.

Organ Farms sells 8 oz. bags of barley straw that will treat approximately 1,000 gallons of water. For larger bodies of water, they produce special five pound tubular netting bags filled with barley straw that can float along the surface of the water. The eight-foot-long netting enables sunlight, water and oxygen to penetrate the bags and brew down like a tea bag. One surface acre of water requires between 90-225 lbs. of barley straw depending on the quality of your water and the nutrient level.

Much of the success for the promotion of the hay and straw operation can be credited to Debbie Petet, who is the marketing arm of Organ Farms. "I have really researched the

application and use of barley straw," said Petet. "I have talked to everyone from the Environmental Protection Agency to many University Extension offices, as well as end-users including waste water treatment facilities, golf course superintendents and numerous pond or water garden owners." Organ Farms has already established clientele in North Carolina and Florida.

Although much of the operation is mechanized, three other employees also provide labor in the production and packaging of hay and straw products. They include Ron French, Pete Mayberry and Cricket Hart.

During the fall months, Organ Farms also offers a full-line of decorative items, as well as mums, pumpkins, gourds, fodder shocks and their mini-bales. They also plan to add a straw fort for kids to play in.

Organ Farms is located on Route 14, just east of McLeansboro. Electricity for the farm is provided by Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative. "We are getting ready to add additional electric service due to our expansion," said Organ. "Wayne-White personnel have always been very helpful and the service is dependable."

For more information about straw and hay products, call Gary or Debbie at (618) 643-3800 or check out their Web site at [www.organfarms.org](http://www.organfarms.org).



Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative

[www.WWCEC.com](http://www.WWCEC.com)