

Precut (Virgin) Rye Straw

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Rye can be harvested for straw after it heads out, but before it sets seed. This is called precut or virgin rye straw. The Penn State article below says to mow it before the anthers come out to prevent anthers from getting into air intakes and covering machinery. One farmer commented on a blog, that it takes longer to dry if you mow it before pollination (6 days) versus after the anther come out (2 or 3 days). The process is to mow it and let it get a couple tenths of an inch of rain to bleach it and make it as white as possible. If there is too much rain, it will mold, turn brown, and get dusty. When it rains on freshly mowed straw, the water sheds off pretty well with little bleaching. When the straw has dried partially before the rain, it will have a better bleaching effect. As always in farming, timing and weather will make the difference. The drying process may take several days and require it to be ted more than once. Ted it in the morning when it is limb and less likely to break from the handling.

Time to Cut Rye for Straw

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Rye is now being mowed for straw around southeast PA. The warmer than normal spring has forced the rye into head a week or two earlier than expected and the [PaPipe](#) confirms that showing growing degree days across Pennsylvania are 150 to 300 units above average.

Harvesting precut rye straw allows farmers to harvest straw with their hay equipment without needing to have it combined first. The rye is mowed between heading and prior to flowering to maximize the yield, and in time to double crop field corn, soybeans or sweet corn. Ideally mow it before flowering to avoid the pollen and flower anthers sticking to equipment and air intakes. Unlike hay, rye needs a rain shower or two to bleach it from green to yellow or almost white in color.

The straw market has softened as new construction in recent years has slowed the demand for straw; however rye straw still makes excellent livestock and horse bedding. Rye is relatively easy to establish and can be planted later than wheat and yields more straw. A 1½–2 ton yield would be average, but it can yield over 3 tons per acre. It is an excellent nutrient scavenger and a good cover crop to protect the soil over winter after soybeans or other low residue crops like vegetables.

Rye is mowed after heading but before the seed develops. It is tilled once or twice while it dries and needs a couple tenths of an inch of rain to bleach, then it is raked and baled. Precut rye straw is longer, cleaner, and brighter than wheat straw, making it a favored bedding at livestock shows and fairs.