

## Role of Alfalfa in Our Farming Operation

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Our farming operation consists of 214 acres. We raise 14,000 pounds of tobacco, have a purebred beef cattle herd, and sell hay. Alfalfa is the only one of the three sources of income that we can project an increase for 1996.

Our alfalfa cash hay sales have increased for several years due to the increase of suburban horse owners in the Louisville area.

I think it is important to have a written plan for 1996. We wouldn't think of making a long trip without a map, especially into strange territory - we farmers are in strange territory. If you don't know your destination, you don't know where you are going. I also think of another saying I read recently, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans".

Some of our plans for alfalfa in 1996 include: marketing, production, storage and grazing.

### I. Marketing Plans

I think marketing is the most important part of cash hay sales. Many people can produce alfalfa, but selling it is another story. We plan to contact our past customers to determine their needs for 1996. The Louisville area has many new pleasure horse boarding farms - most feed hay all year. We plan to make personal contact with these owners.

Our plan is to target our advertising to local and regional media. We will test all lots of hay. Some of our best hay sales have come from the state list of tested hay. I would highly recommend new producers to test your hay and be added to this list.

Over the past several years there has been a drought in regions of surrounding states. This is a good area to make contacts for hay sales.

Remember - "*Quality Sells*"

### II. Production Plans

First priority - try to produce the highest quality, just as we have for tobacco, fruits and vegetables. We will have plenty of second and third quality lots due to weather and mismanagement.

Timeliness is the key word in production of quality hay. The actual date of the first cutting sets the time frame for the entire year. I've seen tobacco set from the first week of May to the middle of June, and excellent crops were produced. Cut alfalfa the first of May, set tobacco later.

Timeliness of cutting, raking and baling is critical. Alfalfa can be cut in the perfect stage, but still lose up to 40% by raking and baling at the wrong moisture level; I've done it.

We plan to seed five to ten acres a year to keep our fifty acres of alfalfa in rotation. New seeding is a very important time in the history of an alfalfa crop.

We have no-tilled all seedings since 1985. Our best success has been drilled into cover crop in April. About 20 to 25% of quality is affected by soils and fertility. My experience from custom seeding several hundred acres a year for twenty years is the most farmers are more aware of their fertility levels following row crops than pasture land. Row crops have the choice of the best soils.

A healthy, weed free stand is the key to making a profit with alfalfa. A good soil test is extremely important.

There is a difference in varieties - look at the three locations of variety tests we have in Kentucky. Compare the top five to the bottom five. There is a big difference. We are fortunate to have two commercial companies with variety tests on our farm. It has been interesting to observe the differences.

### III. Storage

We have tried several things - large rolls outside, no cover, plastic sleeves, tarps to cover stacks, plastic silage bags, and tobacco barns. Our experience has been barns first, tarps second and the rest unsuccessful for alfalfa storage. We plan to make more room in our tobacco barns for stacking the best alfalfa.

### IV. Grazing

Our experience has been a growing experience, literally. We think water, fencing and rotation are the big three in grazing alfalfa. We've had experience with intensive grazing since 1987, mostly clover and fescue. I don't see any big differences in management of alfalfa or clover-fescue grazing.

You need the best forage, water as close as possible (preferably 800'-1200'), creative fencing, the best electric charger you can buy, cattle numbers large enough or paddocks small enough to rotate every two or three days, and out pastures of clover-fescue for wet periods. Our plan is to gradually graze more alfalfa as beef prices increase in the next few years.