MY OBSERVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITH ALFALFA

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I was raised on a small dairy farm in Henry County, Kentucky. I'm the oldest of six children and wanted to leave the farm as soon as possible. Upon graduation from Transylvania College in 1956, I was quickly drafted into the U.S. Army. I was sent to El Paso, Texas, for training and remained in the southwest for 11 (eleven) years.

In 1958 I married Carolyn Billman. We have 4 (four) children: Rae Lynne, Janet, Keith, and Joy.

Upon returning home to Henry County to farm and teach school in 1967, I found a catastrophe had happened to the alfalfa I had known as a boy - the weevil. I found that we had reached a peak of one-half million acres of alfalfa in Kentucky in 1965. The acreage had dropped to 150,000 acres soon after the weevil arrived. In the 1980's, thanks to this conference, chemicals to control the weevil, and producer confidence, we have increased our acreage in Kentucky to the present 360,000 acres.

OUR FARMING OPERATION

We began farming 1967 on 70 rented acres with 20 leased cows, no grass, no fence, and no money. My wife and I were teaching school and wanted to farm. The big break came when my county agents asked to renovate a fescue pasture with red clover to be used as a field day demonstration. This demonstration got my attention. I began to realize the possibilities of being a forage farmer.

This start has expanded in 25 years to a 214 acre farm which includes a purebred Charolais beef herd, 11 acres of burley tobacco, and hay sales of 180 tons annually. Our forages consist of 144 acres clover-fescue pasture, 30 acres of grass hay, and 22 acres of alfalfa.

FESCUE TO ALFALFA

My forage farming experience can be briefly described as a journey from fescue to alfalfa. After observing what legumes could do for a fescue pasture on my grandmother's farm, I purchased the first John Deere No-Till seeder in our county and began to do custom work for my neighbors. I've custom seeded about 3,400 acres in the past 20 years. In the past few years I've no-tilled alfalfa. There are several critical points to consider in no-tilling alfalfa.
SEEDING

1. Recent history of field to be seeded
   -previous crops
   -chemicals used, amount and dates of application
   -weed problems (Johnsongrass, Nodding Thistle, etc.)

2. Soil fertility
   -current soil test (more than one)
   -pH must be 6.4 to 6.7
   -lime must be applied 6 months in advance, sometimes longer

3. Competition
   -living competition must be eliminated
   -dead plant growth must not shade the soil surface
   -the first year is critical - weeds must be controlled

4. Timing
   -frost free
   -adequate moisture
   -seed at proper time

5. High quality seed
   -disease resistant
   -pest resistant
   -certified
   -winterhardy
   -variety (top ten)

6. Seeding Technique
   -inoculation
   -precise seeding (½ inch)
   -soil seed contact

PRODUCTION

My other experience and observations with alfalfa has to do with production. Over many years of custom baling, I’ve baled 9 tons per acre consistently for one customer and 3 tons per acre on an adjoining farm over a period of 10 years. I have observed one neighbor being able to maintain a stand for 6 years, and another no more than 3 years. The difference, in my opinion, is MANAGEMENT. The keys appear to be:
1. Establishment - a dense, weed-free stand  
2. Fertilizing established stands  
3. Weed, insect and disease control  
4. Harvest schedule  
5. Selection of variety (winterhardy, certified, disease resistant)

MARKETING

Last, but probably the most important point, is to have a plan for utilization of a top quality alfalfa crop.

If you are considering alfalfa as a cash hay crop, you must have the highest quality possible. It must be tested to know the quality; you can’t tell by look or smell. A dairy farmer in Georgia will want to know the NIR test results in addition to a visual description. There is a shortage of high quality alfalfa, but I think you have to have a local and regional outlet for your hay. You will have to eat the damaged hay or have local farmers willing to buy the lower quality.

The Kentucky Pride Hay Marketing Association is an excellent tool for selling hay. Our office, in Bowling Green, welcomes your inquiries for buying or selling.

Your county agent has estimated enterprise cost and returns for alfalfa cash hay sales. I think it is extremely important that you get a copy and pencil in your own figures before making a decision for a large alfalfa acreage.

If you can produce more than 4 tons per acre of high quality alfalfa hay, there can be good returns to land, capital and management.