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“Large Enough to Serve, Small Enough to Care”

Alfalfa Management 101

With the price of hay as high as it is, alfalfa management is very important. From planting to weed control there are several items to remember when working with alfalfa. When seeding alfalfa, ground preparation is very important and a two tillage pass is recommended before seeding. As for seeding, plant seed populations anywhere from fifteen to twenty five pounds per acre. After seeding, have the field rolled with a land roller to ensure that there is good soil to seed contact and this also levels the field for harvest. With this year's current weather pattern, hold off on a two tillage pass until there is a bit more moisture. The ground preparation for new seeding alfalfa is extremely important. Planting alfalfa can often pay long term dividends as it can be left in anywhere from three to five years, making the seedbed that much more critical.

When checking an established field of alfalfa there should be a minimum of ten plants per square foot, and fifteen to twenty five plants per square foot are ideal for optimum alfalfa production. If populations drop below ten plants after year three, consider another crop.

Alfalfa should be fertilized each year. Dry fertilizer should be put down at ninety to one hundred units of phosphorus and between two to three hundred units of potash. Every cutting removes the nutrient value from the soil making the fertilizer an essential piece of the healthy alfalfa equation. MaxIn for Alfalfa is a product that contains micronutrients specific for alfalfa that can be tank mixed with the insecticide application making spraying very cost effective. This should be done every cutting. Weed control is significant on newly seeded alfalfa as the field will come up with weeds. Roundup Ready alfalfa has been a huge asset for the alfalfa industry and is much more cost effective in the long term due to the longevity of the alfalfa plant. Roundup Ready alfalfa is also great for dandelion control as Roundup can be applied in year three or four to take care of the weeds. If electing to go the traditional route, Pursuit can be used to clean up the weeds and there is also Buctril, which can be sprayed for weed control.

Insects also pose problems in alfalfa. The alfalfa weevil can be a problem as they chew up the leaves, which then reduces the tonnage on each cutting. They usually show up after the first two weeks of a cutting to do their damage. The Potatoe Leaf Hopper poses large problems by feeding on the plant and injecting a toxin into the plant, which causes yellowing or hopper burn. This effectively stunts the plants and causes a reduction in tonnage. The toxin also reduces the crude protein content of the plant reducing the feed value of the plants. There are various insecticides that can be sprayed to stop both of these insects. If gophers are a problem in the hay-fields, the Hawarden FEC location has a gopher poison machine and sells the bait to quickly remedy the problem.

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Finally, never take a late cutting of alfalfa in the fall as six inches of existing growth is needed going into the winter months for the plant’s survival. Far too many growers become greedy and want to grab that last cutting, but the long term plan has to be at the forefront of all alfalfa planning.

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