

Don't 'Starve' Alfalfa, Speaker Urges

Most farmers who grow alfalfa don't get nearly as much yield per acre as they could and a major reason is that they starve the crop with low levels of fertilization, Dr. Richard M. Thorup, regional agronomist of Chevron Chemical Company, told local farmers attending the annual Ortho banquet Monday at Meadow Hills Dining Hall.

Farmers can readily expect yields of five to six tons per acre of alfalfa "if we do the things we now know can be done," Thorup stated.

But the statewide alfalfa production average in 1971 was, only about half that amount, or some 2.65 tons per acre.

While the ag industry has been proud of rapid gains and output in many areas, Thorup noted that he recently saw an 1876 Pennsylvania Farm Year Book in which alfalfa output was 1.23 tons per acre. It's taken nearly 95 years to double this output but

"let's hope it doesn't take another 95 years to again double."

Thorup noted the world record alfalfa output by a California farmer who produced 16.2 tons per acre on 11 cuttings on year-round farming. While the local climate isn't adaptable for year-round farming, Thorup emphasized he thinks yields in the six to 10 ton range are attainable with present know-how.

He stated that it takes a lot of good management and planning to get these high yields and he stated that "fertilizer is one of the very important aspects of crop yield."

He showed a chart indicating that alfalfa nutrient requirements are much higher per acre than corn, emphasizing that farmers who attempt to get top alfalfa yields from good corn ground can often expect to be disappointed unless they build up the soil.

He stated that farmers putting alfalfa on ground which has been farmed by corn for many years may be "literally starving the crop to death."

He quoted the Ohio State University study which emphasizes that alfalfa needs nutrients at levels two or three times higher than corn.

To give an indication of just how much fertilizer may be required, he cited what he described as a typical farm which may have soils with levels of 40 pounds of phosphorus. But

alfalfa takes levels of around 90 pounds for top yields. But in the first year of growth alfalfa will only take up about one-tenth of the available phosphorus.

He explained that instead of a simple difference of 50 pounds per acre, this means that the farmer must apply 10 times as much or some 500 pounds initially just to bring the soil up to the optimum level for alfalfa production.

Once this high level of fertility has been reached, Thorup explained, it then is simply a matter of replacing each year the amount which is taken off by the crop.

But he emphasized that until the farmer makes this initial investment and gets the ground built up to the proper nutrient level, he can normally not expect yields to go much beyond the three or four tons per acre level.

High levels of nitrogen and potash also are important. The crop itself generates much of its own nitrogen requirements.

But Thorup emphasized that he foresees the time when farmers who are interested in high alfalfa yields will be compelled to apply extra nitrogen. While the crop can generate its own nitrogen need for three and four ton yields, he indicated he thinks the crop will need help with nitrogen at the higher yield levels.

Asked after the talk about the economic importance of the alfalfa crop, and cost versus return on fertilizer, Thorup noted that alfalfa in Lancaster County's second largest crop with 52,000 acres in alfalfa. He estimated that probably 40,000 of these acres are under-fertilized.

For the farmer interested in getting the top yield, Thorup acknowledged that the biggest investment will be in bringing the crop fertility levels up to what they should be. But he added that the main reason this would be necessary is that farmers have been taking the nutrients out of the soil over the years without putting enough back.

He explained that most farmers already are putting some

fertilizer on their alfalfa and that the difference to take the crop from what is now being used to what should be used probably would not be too great. He indicated that the farmer probably can get by on total cost of fertilizer equivalent to the value of the return of a half ton per acre of alfalfa. But the difference in yield

from proper fertilization may be many times greater, he indicated.

He added that proper fertilization will result in alfalfa with higher protein content and more feed value.

"I think we certainly have the potential for increased production," Thorup concluded.

My Neighbors



"Well I felt sorry for the poor creature being a hundred-to-one shot and I felt my bet would boost her morale."

Central Tractor Meets

The fifth meeting of the Central 4-H Tractor Club was held February 29 at Landis Brothers, Inc., Manheim Pike, Lancaster.

A demonstration was given by Dennis Landis on ignition and compression checking tools.

Glen Porter, local leader, gave a demonstration on the importance of fuel and air mixture.

The next meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. March 7 at Landis Brothers.

News Reporter,
Jere Swarr

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