

Growers hear latest in alfalfa management

CAMP HILL — An update on top producers and a look at the future for Pennsylvania's 850,000 acres of alfalfa highlighted the seed symposium held in Camp Hill Tuesday.

The meeting, sponsored by Beechley-Hardy Seed Company, Shiremanstown, drew on expertise from Penn State agronomists and experts from W-L Research, Inc., better known to most farmers under its old name, Waterman-Loomis Seeds.

Penn State's John Baylor told the group of over 100 persons that farmers in the state alfalfa yield contest last year had an average of \$200 in costs to grow an acre of alfalfa.

That matches the cost to grow an acre of corn quite closely. Largest single expense was for machinery. Smallest input was for seed which represented about four percent of the total costs.

This year about 60 farmers are expected to complete the alfalfa growers program. The state average for production by contest members is about 5.5 tons

Top yield was 9.1 tons turned in by Dan Schrack, Clinton County.

Average phosphate removal was about 370 pounds per acre, or what researchers expected. But, Baylor noted, potash removal was a real eye-opener. Farmers remove almost 400 pounds per acre when growing a good alfalfa crop.

The top 10 producers in 1979 averaged 7.6 tons hay equivalent in the field. Storage losses were not counted.

All but one grew his alfalfa on a deep limestone soil. The exception was on shale ground. All soil tested and used lots of manure in the corn phase of the rotation.

Although the top 10 used five different varieties, Saranac AR and WL 311 were the most popular. All growers got at least four cuttings, one took five.

Average cutting interval was 36 to 39 days, except for the fourth cutting, an aftermath cutting, which averaged 46 days after third cut.

While most of the state's

top growers sprayed for insects, three used no insecticide at all, a fact Baylor attributed to close monitoring of insect populations.

Almost all of the top producing 1979 stands were spring seeded in 1978, and 90 percent of them were clear seeded with Tolban or Eptam.

W-L's Associate Director of Research A A Gus Hanson said breeding for yield and adaptation is the route to high profits.

The Highland, Maryland based researcher said he feels a broad range of tolerance to pest problems is more important than excellent resistance to one or two problems.

Broad ranging pest tolerance, including insects and diseases, makes a variety useful to farmers over a longer time and geographic area, and therefore makes the line commercially viable.

Hanson said the top varieties in the Maryland test plots include WL 311, 312, 221 and 220.

He added that several new

lines in the 200 series will be available to farmers in the near future.

Joseph Graham presented the group with facts and figures to show how much alfalfa disease problems have been reduced in the past 20 years.

A 1960 USDA study showed that Pennsylvania farmers could expect to lose eight percent of their crop to bacterial wilt, eight percent to root rots, two percent to viruses, nine percent to other diseases like common

and lepto leaf spot, and three percent to nematodes.

In addition, weeds took about 12 percent of a crop and insects would wipe out 15 percent. Loss figures of over 50 percent on alfalfa valued at \$180,000,000 in Pennsylvania had to hurt farmers.

Improved varieties have helped greatly, he said. Bacterial wilt has been cut to three percent, root rots to five percent, insect damage has been cut in half as has weed damage.

Result is farmers now are losing only about a quarter of their crop instead of half—it's still far from perfect, Graham admitted, but it is an improvement.

He reviewed the Race II Anthracnose problem and assured the group that resistance is coming, although some lines like Arc which are Race I resistant are not secure from Race II. Race II has been found in Maryland and Virginia.

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Among the speakers and panelists at Tuesday's seed symposium were, back left, Bill Glessner, Naugle Feed and Supply, Jim Johnson, Farmers Brokerage and Supply, A A Hanson, W-L's associate director of research, W-L Entomologist John Kugler, front left, Corn States Hybrids' Milke Harshbarger, Penn State Agronomists John Baylor and Joseph McGahen, Vic Cappucci, Kintner Milling.

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