

## Alfalfa selection involves more than cost

DE KALB, II. — Forage producers who base alfalfa variety selection on initial cost per pound of seed could be making a mistake they'll have to live with for years.

Merlin Eichstadt, regional agronomist for Dekalb-Pfizer Genetics, says basing a long-term decision on the relatively low input cost of seed could result in economic losses of several hundred dollars over a typical four-year lifespan of an alfalfa crop.

Eichstadt points to a study showing that although seed of one proprietary alfalfa variety cost nearly \$3 per pound vs. \$1.92 per pound for a public variety, net economic return was nearly 20 times higher per acre than the initial difference in seed cost.

Other studies from several states have shown that high-quality alfalfa yields of more than 10 tons per acre per year are within

reach for producers who manage the crop with as much intensity as they do for other segments of their farming.

Eichstadt suggests producers consider the following factors when choosing an alfalfa variety:

**Fast start:** Selecting a variety that establishes a strong foothold early, thereby decreasing yield-reducing weed competition is important, Eichstadt notes. Research shows the difference in yields after first-year seeding could be as much as 50 percent.

**Winterhardiness:** Once established, it's important for the variety to withstand extreme temperature variations experienced throughout much of the country's major alfalfa-producing regions.

Tests reveal that plant death loss during the winter can amount to up to 90 percent of the stand. That

means lower yields per acre and decreased longevity.

One test conducted over four seasons in Minnesota indicated a four-ton-per-acre yield difference, due in part to different winterhardiness among varieties.

**Longevity:** Winterhardiness and disease resistance help to determine the life of the stand. These factors must be bred into a variety.

Eichstadt says varieties differ in their ability to maintain high yields over the years. In tests conducted in Pennsylvania, some varieties showed up to 50 percent yield reduction over four years. A few lost very little yield.

**Irrigation/dryland performance:** During the life of an alfalfa stand, growing conditions may vary from ample rainfall to drought. Producers should review alfalfa variety performance under variable moisture conditions like

the University of Nebraska irrigated and dryland studies. Some varieties do well under dryland or ample moisture conditions, but not both. A few of the best varieties like Dekalb Brand 120 do well in all growing conditions.

**Fast regrowth:** Many varieties produce high yields from the first cutting but show marked decreases as the season wears on. They cannot recover from an aggressive management schedule says the Dekalb-Pfizer agronomist.

Producers should look for a variety with the potential to quickly develop a good, leafy canopy which turns the sun's energy into forage while battling weed pressure. Producers should be able to harvest more cuttings

and tonnage from varieties with fast regrowth.

**Crude protein content:** Eichstadt says producers must ultimately consider a variety's potential as a protein source for livestock.

Research in Wisconsin has shown the difference in crude protein levels produced by several alfalfa varieties to be worth as much as \$150 per acre per year. One variety, Dekalb Brand 120, offered \$461 worth of protein per acre over three cuttings.

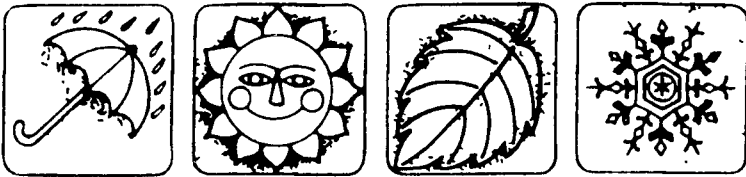
These selection factors must be combined with intensive management to produce top yields of high-quality forage, Eichstadt emphasizes. But, he adds, the plant genetic potential exists for those producers who are willing to do so.

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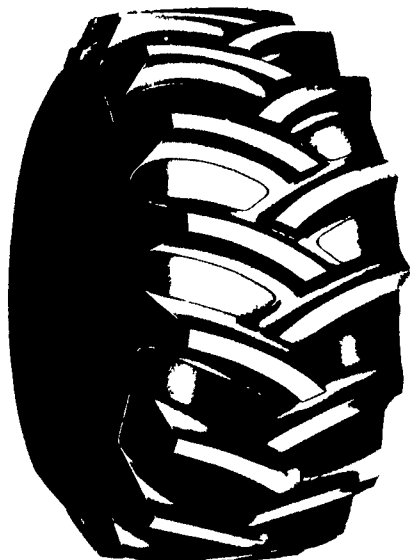
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