

Direct-seeded alfalfa gains popularity

DEKALB, Ill. — The opportunity for higher alfalfa yields during the seeding year has helped boost direct seeding's popularity, says DeKalb-Pfiser agronomist Greg Jones.

Farmers can establish alfalfa faster with direct seeding than by using a companion or nurse crop, Jones explains. That's because a companion crop competes with the alfalfa for nutrients and moisture and slows plant development. The companion crop must be harvested prior to cutting the alfalfa as well.

"Improvements in the herbicides available to control weeds in alfalfa also have increased the popularity of direct seeding," Jones notes. In the past, companion crops have been used to help suppress weed competition and to control soil erosion in seedling stands of alfalfa.

Field selection is a vital management step in direct seeding. Since no companion crop is planted to help control soil erosion, Jones advises farmers to direct-seed alfalfa only on level or

gently sloping (5 percent or less) fields.

Once a field is selected, a soil test should be taken to determine fertility needs, the agronomist says. The optimum soil pH range for alfalfa is 6.5 - 7.0. If it is below 6.5, lime should be added.

The optimum soil test levels for alfalfa are 50 to 60 pounds per acre of available phosphorus; 350 to 400 pounds per acre of exchangeable potassium; 3 pounds per acre of boron; and 40 pounds per acre of sulfur. Fertilize to bring soils to these levels.

Prior to planting, growers should prepare a firm level seedbed that is free of trash.

Obtaining the desired alfalfa stand means paying close attention to such details as planting depth and seeding rate, Jones notes. "Alfalfa seedlings are small, fragile plants that can't push through the soil if planted too deep," he adds. Recommended planting depths vary from one-fourth to one-half inch on heavier clay soils to a maximum of one

inch on sandy soils.

Direct seeding requires a higher seeding rate than alfalfa seeded with a companion crop. At least 15 to 18 pounds per acre is required to reach a first-year stand of 20 to 30 plants per square foot in most areas, Jones says.

High-quality seed should be purchased from a reliable supplier, recommends DeKalb

agronomist Bill Arndorfer. "Look at the seed tag to check for acceptable germination levels," he adds. The seed should be inoculated with rhizobia to ensure nitrogen-fixing activity, especially if the alfalfa is being planted in a field that hasn't been in alfalfa for several years, he advises.

Another consideration at planting is the timing. "Farmers

should plant as early as possible in the spring," Arndorfer says. If fall seeded, alfalfa should be planted six weeks ahead of the normal date of the first killing frost.

The availability of herbicides for weed control coupled with higher first-year alfalfa yields adds up to success. Direct seeding is an option farmers should consider, Jones concludes.

Chester Dairy Day on Feb. 27

WEST CHESTER — The Chester County Cooperative Extension Service will hold its Annual Dairy Day Program on Feb. 27. The program will be held at the Sadsburyville Fire Hall from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

The educational program will include presentations on farm respiratory hazards, new dairy feeding concepts, and coccidiosis and heifer parasite control. In addition, the program will include a participatory presentation entitled "First On the Scene", which discusses new crucial actions to take when faced with a farm ac-

cident. "First on the Scene" is a beneficial program for dairy producers spouses, family members, and other farm personnel.

The day's agenda will also include a farmer panel of Pennsylvania and Maryland producers discussing new feeding systems.

The Sadsburyville Fire Hall is located on old Route 30 between Coatesville and the intersection of Route 10 and Route 30.

For more information, call the Chester County Cooperative Extension Service office at 696-3500.

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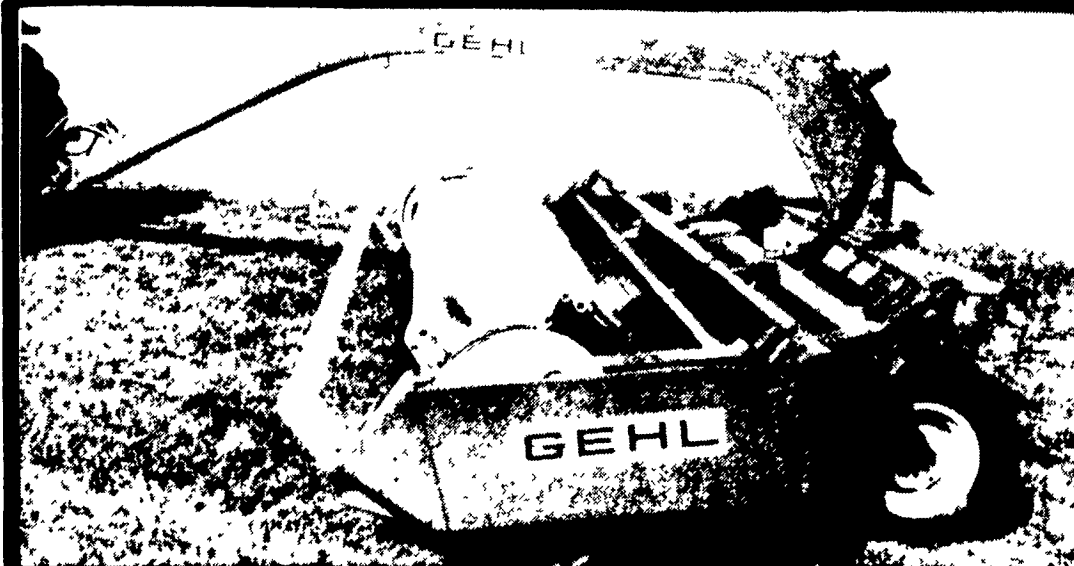
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