



GRAZING ALFALFA
WARREN C. THOMPSON
ABI Alfalfa

National Forage Specialist

The use of alfalfa as a grazing crop is spreading across the USA in the humid regions particularly in the Midwest, Northeast, and much of the transition areas. The introduction and expanded use of true grazing tolerant varieties and continued needs to reduce production costs to increase net returns from dairy and beef cattle are the driving forces for moving in this direction. For now many leading farmers are using this alfalfa and finding not only a good yield but one with above expected persistence; a legume that is adapted to well drained soils which can be elevated to high pH rapidly at minimum costs. A legume that will survive under punishing treatment yet produce more abundantly and survive with better stand uniformity and less weed intrusion when grazed rotationally than any other legume grown in America.

The range of advantages to using alfalfa include: 1. Feed quality; there is no better legume. 2. Reliability + summer drought tolerance is unexcelled. 3. Annual and lifetime yield; alfalfa tops all

legumes. 4. Versatility for use as grazings as well as for hay or silage. 5. Machinery and labor costs are greatly reduced. 6. Profit margins are increased as production costs decline. 7. Weather related harvest risks are reduced/eliminated. 8. Except for establishment, fertilizer and lime costs are great reduced.

Successful alfalfa grazing starts with a good stand. Start by adding lime to raise the pH to 6.5 or higher and fertilize according to current soil test recommendations. Seed at 15 pounds per acre or higher during the recommended time of year. Spring is the seeding season of choice in this area.

Most farmers who graze prefer to grow grass with their alfalfa to help manage bloat and prevent serious soil profile damage under exceptionally wet conditions. Grass can be weeded with the alfalfa or delayed for a year or two, and overdrilled in the existing stand of alfalfa. Autumn is the best time for overdrilling. The system of choice and most successful is 4-6 pounds of orchardgrass seeded through a no-till drill.

Rotational grazing is more productive and easier to manage than conventional continuous grazing. With the development of cheaper

and more mobile electric fencing and watering systems, moving cattle is easy and less time consuming than inexperienced producers would expect. Especially is this found to be true once the animals have learned the routine and their rewards of more abundant high quality grazing once they are moved. Animals grazing on fresh vegetative forage eat more and convert a greater proportion to meat and milk. Another great advantage to rotational grazing; manure changes from a problem to a real asset. For when animals are grouped, manure is more uniformly distributed thus reducing the amount of topdress commercial fertilizers needed.

Managing a field for grazing in the establishment year can be quite successful with good planning. We recommend that the first crop be harvested as hay rather than grazed. This allows the immature plants (including crowns and roots) to grow and the newly prepared seedbeds to "settle."

When possible, stagger the hay harvest at 3 to 6 day intervals. Mowing a portion of a field (25-40 percent) at a time will help establish a sequence for subdividing for the remainder of the grazing season. Rotation grazing can begin in 20 to 25 days following hay harvest depending on growth and weather/soil conditions. For spring seedings, many farmers will get two grazings, others just one the first year. Remove the animals about five weeks or more ahead of first historic freeze date to allow time for

food reserve restoration. The after-frost harvest on new alfalfa should be avoided unless there is a dire need for more forage. But even then, at least 4 to 6 inches of stubble should remain for winter protection.

Grazing established alfalfa can be simplified with a well designed program. One of the best systems that we have seen all across the USA is to turn the herd into the entire field early and when the alfalfa is 6 to 8 inches tall. As forage production exceeds animal needs, reduce the paddock size and back fence to prevent continued animal entrance in the areas already grazed. Continue to reduce the paddocks size until the animals graze regular patterns. When pasture production exceeds the grazing needs and before the crop gets well into maturity, remove this excess as hay or silage to keep the grazing sequence running smoothly and the vegetation at its highest possible quality. How often should cattle be moved? Farmers who move their animals each day report more meat and milk per acre than those who move the cattle once a week. And those who rotate on a weekly basis report a better response than those who move once a month. In every case, better yields and profits come from rotation grazing than with continuous grazing.

What about continuously grazing alfalfa? As farmers know, close continuous grazing is hard on any forage, grass and legumes alike. In fact, when any forage is sandpaper-grazed continuously, yields and stands both suffer. Unless the vari-

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