



PLANNING FOR THIS YEAR'S ALFALFA GROWING SEASON
DES MOINES, Iowa – Older alfalfa stands may not be providing optimum value per acre for producers. But there are a few easy ways to check stands to see if you're getting the most value from your alfalfa fields, according to an expert with Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.
 "Today's alfalfa growers and livestock producers can't afford *not* to get the maximum value per acre from their forage," said Carl Bannon, Pioneer technical information manager with the company's eastern sales area. "It is important to plant varieties that offer top yields and quality. And it's just as important to double-check established stands, especially if they are

more than four years old. If these older stands aren't producing at optimum yield levels, it's better to rotate to corn or another crop."

According to Bannon, as stands get older they thin out, resulting in decreased yields and increased weeds. The weeds reduce the forage quality of the alfalfa and make drying to the correct harvest moisture more difficult.

It's relatively easy to check the health and population of older stands, Bannon said. Begin by counting the number of plants in one square foot at several locations throughout a field. The alfalfa population in an established stand should average at least four plants per square foot.

DESIRED PLANTS PER SQUARE FOOT BASED ON AGE OF STAND

| AGE OF STAND | CONDITION OF STAND | | |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------|------|
| | GOOD | FAIR | POOR |
| New Seeding | 25 | 15 | < 10 |
| 1 Year Old | 12+ | 8 - 12 | < 8 |
| 2 Years Old | 8+ | 5 - 8 | < 5 |
| 3 Years Old | 6+ | 4 - 6 | < 4 |
| 4 Years or More | 4+ | 3 - 5 | < 3 |

A second method for evaluating alfalfa stands was developed by University of Wisconsin forage agronomics Dan Undersander and Dennis Cosgrove and involves counting alfalfa stems. This method allows you to wait until stems have grown 6 to 10 inches before checking the number of stems per square inch.

Stem-counting offers a more accurate idea of stand health and yield potential. If there are more than 55 stems per square foot, maximum yield potential can be expected. Stem counts dropping below 40 stems per square foot can reduce yield by 25 percent or more. If stem counts fall below 40 per square foot,

consider rotation. You also can check the health of the stand by digging up several plants and checking for crown and stem rots.

"It is important to know if your current alfalfa varieties are producing yields that make a difference for your farming operation," Bannon said. "If they aren't, switch to another crop and consider using newer varieties for your new alfalfa seedings this year."

"We have a number of excellent Pioneer varieties from which to choose," Bannon said.

Once you have checked older stands and selected new varieties Bannon suggests you follow proven management practices to ensure quality alfalfa production.

Prior to planting, make sure that your soil pH measures between 6.5 and 7. Be sure you're getting good seed-to-soil contact by either rolling or culti-packing prior to and after seeding alfalfa. After seeds have emerged, scout fields to determine if weed control is needed. In addition, scout for potato leafhoppers when plants are 3 to 6 inches tall.

For more information about alfalfa variety selection, stand checks or management practices, contact your local Pioneer products provider.



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