Spring Fever Alfalfa–

The Pitfalls of Spring Seeding Alfalfa in West Texas

Calvin Trostle, Extension Agronomy, Texas A&M–Lubbock, (806) 746-6101,
c-trostle@tamu.edu
Updated February 2003

I have received quite a few questions on alfalfa during January, and this is probably not a good sign as it means producers are thinking about planting in the spring which is not recommended in West Texas for several reasons.

With alfalfa selling at good prices and the word that many new dairies are planned for the northern South Plains and southwest Panhandle, prospective producers are looking at trying now to reap potential benefits. Producers interested in establishing spring seedings of alfalfa need to have the disadvantages pointed out. The recommended time to plant alfalfa in Texas statewide is from August 20 - October 1. In the Texas South Plains, a good target might be late August to about September 10 after the heat has broke some, and perhaps slightly earlier in the Panhandle, but still soon enough to get at least 6 weeks of growth before a killing frost.

Spring plantings are not recommended for the following reasons:

Root systems and crowns of spring-seeded plants may be poorly developed in response to longer photoperiods.

More water is required for production.

Weed and insect problems tend to be more severe with spring-seeded alfalfa.

A large reduction in first year yields, 50% or more, can be expected when compared to fall plantings. In many cases no more than two cuttings can be expected. Oklahoma State University information suggests that yields of spring planted alfalfa in subsequent years are lower than fall planted alfalfa.

Is it impossible to obtain a successful stand of alfalfa with a spring planting? If irrigation is available, the weather is agreeable, and the planets are properly aligned (Dr. Eric Prostko's words!). Spring plantings for alfalfa in the South Plains usually will seed into spring oats to protect the seedlings from wind and sand. But lets be prudent. Rather than **gambling** your alfalfa start-up costs in a spring seeding, *be patient*, and let's **invest** your alfalfa start-up costs on a fall seeding. In alfalfa seed, you get what you pay for with cheaper alfalfa varieties running

about $2 per pound, and about $4 per pound for top varieties. Suggested seeding rates south of Lubbock may be 20 to 25 lbs./A pure live seed (PLS). In the Texas Panhandle seeding rate targets, based on New Mexico State and Oklahoma State information could be around 15 to perhaps 20 lbs./A of PLS. At 20 pounds an acre, establishment costs could run $60 or more just for seed! That's a lot to lose. (But on the other hand over five years, a slight yield improvement with a higher yielding variety more than makes up the initial difference in seed cost.)

For the grower who has absolutely made up his mind he is going to spring seed alfalfa, I try to get them to cut back on acreage, and save some for fall planting to at least spread their risks.

The bottom line is that spring planted alfalfa, even if seeded into a good small grains cover, makes for risky and expensive production in the first year. Furthermore, like several growers I know who achieved a poor stand or had the crop fail (blew out, etc.), then the tendency of the farmer might be to blame the crop rather than the management. If they lose the stand, they'd rather not look in the mirror for someone to blame for being out the establishment costs, which can easily run $70-90/A. We just can't cut corners; establishing alfalfa must be done right. You hope to have the stand at least five years. Why make one of them a low performer? Once a farmer makes the decision to move to another crop (in this case alfalfa) from cotton, we still need to give it our best shot, and that is a fall planting.

A note on alfalfa acreage and irrigation capacity: in the Texas South Plains we believe that a ton of production requires about 6-7" of effective rainfall or irrigation, perhaps 1" less up toward Farwell or in the northern Panhandle. (Extension's 'Texas Alfalfa Production' guide says 10"/ton, but that is further south AND row watering, a point it doesn't mention.) This guide is available through local Extension offices or download from the Web at http://tcebookstore.org)). There is a formula in the A&M alfalfa guide on page 5 that will help a producer pin down about what the upper limit on acreage should be as they try to fit field size to irrigation capacity. For example, one grower called who was thinking about putting 167 acres in alfalfa, and he had irrigation of 500 gpm, or about 3 gpm per acre. The formula reduced that target acreage down to the mid sixties. A couple of high end growers in Lubbock Co. like to have 10-11 gpm per acre.

For a summary of relevant information resources on alfalfa contact your county extension agent or the Texas A&M Center at Lubbock for a copy of "**Alfalfa Information for West Texas**," by Calvin Trostle. You may also access the guide at http://lubbock.tamu.edu This guide has Texas A&M, New Mexico State, and Oklahoma State information resources, all available via the Internet.

Contributions to this document by Dr. Eric Prostko, former extension agronomist located at Texas A&M–Stephenville, are gratefully acknowledged.