

Need For Safety Net & Research Funding Parity with Other Major Crops, Focus of NAFA DC Fly-In

by Jon Dockter, NAFA

The lack of a legitimate safety net and adequate research funding to address alfalfa and forage industry needs were the focus of the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance's (NAFA) 3rd annual Washington, D.C., Fly-In held February 12-14.

With more than 100 meetings scheduled, NAFA members representing 13 states met with agencies, regulators, and Capitol Hill staff in an effort to promote NAFA objectives, educate members of the House and Senate Ag and Ag Appropriations Committees of the issues important to the alfalfa and forage industry, and continue to build awareness and recognition for the nation's 3rd most value crop.

In meetings with staff of House and Senate Ag Committee members, the focus was on the lack of an adequate safety net for alfalfa and forage producers. The alfalfa and forage industry is not a Title I crop, nor does it have an adequate crop insurance program. In both the Senate and House versions of the 2012 Farm Bill, program crops continue to maintain protection under the newly created "shallow loss" programs (Agriculture Risk Coverage in the Senate version and Price Loss Coverage and Revenue Loss Coverage in the House version). None of these programs, however, covers alfalfa or forage crops and all versions hold the potential of encouraging producers to shift acres away from non-covered commodities such as alfalfa.

Further compounding the issue is the fact that current crop insurance coverage for alfalfa and forage crops is widely considered to be inadequate to protect producers in the event of loss. While the current Forage Production APH insurance program has less than a 10% participation rate among producers, the insurance programs for wheat, corn, and soybean, boast participation rates well above 80%, clearly demonstrating the need for improvement.

NAFA members also met with staff of both the House and Senate Ag Committees and Ag Appropriations Committees addressing the need for parity with other major crops through public research conducted by both Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and land grant universities through National Institute of Food & Agriculture (NIFA). ARS spends in excess of \$34 million dollars a year on other major crops, such as corn, soybean, and wheat, in comparison to less than \$4 million for alfalfa. The disparity is similar at land grant universities. As a result of the lack of public research, yield in alfalfa has not kept pace with other major crops.

In addition to Congressional meetings, NAFA met with: 1) EPA to maintain communication about crop protection tools for the alfalfa seed industry; 2) the U.S. Trade Representative for Ag Affairs regarding low level presence tolerance issues in export markets; 3) USDA's Risk Management Agency to discuss improvements to the Forage Production

APH insurance program; 4) USDA's National Ag Statistics Service to talk about how to improve alfalfa and forage-related statistics; 4) USDA's Research, Education, & Economics Office, National Institute for Food & Agriculture, and Agricultural Research Service to discuss how best to use limited research funding to the greatest benefit of the alfalfa and forage industry.

The 3rd annual "Alfalfa on the Hill: Bluegrass Style" reception, was again the highlight of the event as Congressional members and their staff took advantage of the opportunity to visit informally with NAFA members about industry issues. The



NAFA board member Mark Rogen (South Dakota) and Kristi Noem (R-SD).

The 3rd Annual D.C. Fly-In focused on parity with other major crops in terms of an adequate safety net (Title I program crops; adequate crop insurance coverage) and public research.

reception featured an alfalfa-intensive 'grazing' menu including lamb chops, mini cheeseburgers, beef nega maki, assorted cheeses, vegetables with alfalfa sprout dip, and ice cream bars.

While the mood in Washington is subdued given the looming issues such as the budget, sequester, and debt

ceiling, NAFA representatives were met with enthusiasm by Hill staffers. "Overall, our visits were extremely positive," said Beth Nelson, NAFA President. "While there are obviously some budgetary issues Congress is dealing with right now, I think it's clear we're making an impact and ultimately that will lead to good things."

Alfalfa is key to sustainable agricultural systems and is an economic engine in rural communities - its value for soil conservation, nitrogen fixation, energy savings, crop rotation, and wildlife habitat is unsurpassed. Alfalfa must offer a competitive value for farmers in order to provide these benefits and maintain or expand its acreage base. Being recognized in policy and research funding decisions is critical in keeping pace with other cropping choices.

The industry has already seen a 25% acreage decline since 2002. Without addressing the safety net and research needs, acreage will continue to decline.

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