Targeting the Southern USA to Increase Alfalfa Acreage & Seed Sales

Joseph Bouton[1], Michael Trammell[2], E. Charles Brummer[3]

Member states of the Southern Pasture and Forage Crop Improvement Conference include Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Although alfalfa was successfully grown as livestock feed for over 100 years in all these Southern states, the crop never achieved the primacy and acreage of the Mid- and Far-West. The reasons why are unique to the region. Southern producers define perennials as surviving family generations instead of years. Tens of millions of perennial forage acreages are planted to bermudagrass, tall fescue, and bahiagrass, that in many cases, were established by grandparents and still used today. The most persistent alfalfa stands do not fit that longevity model even in the Mid- and Far-West. Southern soils are inherently acidic and aluminum toxic, so required lime and fertilizer additions were seen as problems. When compared to grasses where simple nitrogen fertilizer and rain produce abundant forage, alfalfa management was seen as high risk. In the end, alfalfa seed companies adopted a self-fulfilling prophecy that the region's acreage would not increase substantially so there is little incentive to invest in promotion, marketing, or sales efforts. This position is puzzling because the region contains the majority of the nation's beef herd, a substantial percentage of the nation's dairy herd, and millions of acres of intensively managed pastures and hay fields suitable for conversion to alfalfa and would seem an obvious target for alfalfa acreage and sales growth.

In this paper, we summarize recent events, research, and outreach programs that are poised to change this view as a new generation of Southern producers and Extension specialists are promoting alfalfa as the best crop to solve problems inherent in the perennial grass systems. Designing and promoting unique, non-traditional alfalfa management systems, even in minor acreages for short durations, is now making a big difference. Alfalfa is used as a "management tool" to form compatible mixtures with bermudagrass to enhance nutritive value of the grass hay and reduced nitrogen fertilizer costs without harming grass persistence thereby supporting year-round, high quality forage production. Winter weather in the region is mild and grazing seasons are long and Southern producers are fundamentally grazers. Using adaptive, grazing tolerant varieties, along with embracing new research on grazing management, was an important step. Those who did not want to harvest alfalfa so often or worried about unpredictable rainy weather, now practice targeted grazing. Persistent weed problems were overcome by herbicide resistant varieties. Alfalfas as part of wildlife management plots are common. Dairymen who planted a silage corn crop after corn crop on the same land are seeing lost productivity and are finding that alfalfa is still the best rotation crop with corn. Therefore, alfalfa is not used solely as pure stand hay and silage in the South. It is becoming an important part of the region's extensive forage-livestock system by serving unique and multiple uses even in small acreages. This makes the South an important target area to increase acreage and seed sales in a time that both are decreasing nationally. However, breeding alfalfa for southern production systems will be important for long-term success. So, economic decision makers and seed companies take note!

---

[1]University of Georgia, emeritus; [2]Oklahoma State University; [3]University California-Davis.