

Crop Water Productivity of Alfalfa Under Different Cutting Schedules

Abdelmoneim Mohamed¹, Sultan Begna³, Brenda Perez², E. Charles Brummer², Dong Wang³, Khaled Bali¹, Daniel Putnam²

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Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.) is the most commonly grown forage crop in the USA. It is also one of the largest water users in California but with high forage production capacity. However, meeting crop's water demand has been challenged by increased competition for water resources between agriculture and urban uses, the recurring drought, and declining groundwater levels in California. Diverse strategies are required to increase alfalfa's water use efficiency, sustainability, and profitability; and one of the potential strategies is adapting best agronomic and water management practices. Efficient water savings measures are needed to maintain alfalfa hay productivity to meet the growing demand of alfalfa hay from dairy industry nationally and globally. A field study was conducted at the University of California Kearney Agricultural Research and Extension Center (KARE), Parlier, California in 2017-2021 to examine Crop Water Productivity (CWP) of alfalfa using different cutting schedules. Cutting schedules were normal cutting (28 days between cuttings), staggered cutting (alternating 21 and 35 days), and late cutting (35 days). A Randomized Block Design experiment with four replicates was used. Non-limiting irrigation water was applied to all plots. Potential evapotranspiration of alfalfa was calculated using the Basic Irrigation Scheduling (BIS) model. Alfalfa CWP in conjunction with cutting schedules were determined. In general, late cutting had the highest seasonal CWP (15.8 Kg ha⁻¹ mm⁻¹; 13% more than normal cutting and 8% more than staggered cutting) averaged over the four years. The potential and prospective challenges of each cutting schedule are determined and will be discussed during the presentation as a tool for growers to select the appropriate cutting schedule for maximizing crop water productivity and for best irrigation water management practice.

¹Kearney Agricultural Research and Extension, University of California, Agricultural and Natural Resources, Parlier, CA 93648; ²Department of Plant Sciences, University of California, Davis, CA 95616; ³Water Management Research Unit, San Joaquin Valley Agricultural Sciences Center, USDA-ARS, Parlier, CA 93648.