Challenges & Opportunities for Alfalfa Moving Forward

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Dennis Hancock is Center Director for U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center (USDFRC) in Madison, WI. The USDFRC is a cooperative effort between the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and other land grant universities. Researchers at the USDFRC focus on problems that are national in scope and that limit effective and efficient use of forage for milk production. It coordinates multidisciplinary efforts involving engineers, microbiologists, chemists, and soil, plant, and animal scientists. The research is directed toward increasing yields and quality of forage grown and harvested; reducing losses associated with harvesting, storage and feeding; and maximizing use of forage nutrients by the dairy cow for milk production. He came to the USDFRC in January 2020 after serving as a Professor in the Crop and Soil Sciences Department at the University of Georgia and served as State Forage Extension Specialist from 2006-2020.

Alfalfa is world renown as one of the most important forage crops because of its immense agronomic, nutritive, and agroecosystem value. Despite this value, alfalfa acreage is on the decline in many areas around the world. Reasons for this decline are many and multi-faceted. This presentation provides an unbiased look at many of those reasons and lays out the challenge the industry has before it as alfalfa workers ensure this valuable crop keeps pace with changing policies, management regimens, and climate. The presentation will outline key opportunities the industry has to reposition, remake, and reimagine alfalfa for the future. Moving forward, genetics and management of alfalfa must evolve to anticipate futuristic advancements in technology and a scale of agriculture limited by cash flow, carbon and nutrient cycling, and ever-shifting government policies.