



101 E. 4th Street Road
Greeley, CO 80631
970-356-4710
Buffalo.GXY@SharpSeed.com

Time is right to begin fall alfalfa seeding

COLORADO

By Randy Buhler
Logan County Agronomy Agent

Now is the time to make that fall alfalfa seeding.

Alfalfa needs about six weeks prior to a killing freeze (26 degrees) to produce a plant that will survive the winter. Start counting the six weeks period after the crop emerges.

Alfalfa requires a firm seed bed. To check your field, walk out across it for some distance. Then turn around and look at your tracks. If your boots sank in only one-quarter to one-half inch, it is just right. If you sank in more, you need to pack the surface prior to drilling the seed. If you sank in less than one-quarter of an inch, you are standing on a road.

Of course, the field should be weed free and not have large clods. If weeds are present, you need to till or spray to remove them. If clods are more evident than pulverized soil, use a roller packer to pulverize the clods prior to drilling.

Any drill that can meter alfalfa seed can be used. The key requirement is that the drill you use must be able to plant the seed about three-quarters inch deep and firmly pack soil around and over the seed. If your drill makes the furrow and meters the seed okay, but if you don't get good soil coverage, your planting will fail. Use a roller packer behind the drill, if the drill doesn't provide good soil coverage of the seed. For irrigated alfalfa, you want the drill rows to be as close together as possible. If your drill has spacing seven inches or wider, plant twice by splitting the rows with the drill. Plant one-half the seeding rate with each pass.

Seed should be certified and treated. We saw a significant advantage for using Apron with the seed in a test at the Hay Days site. Selecting a variety has many considerations. If you want some independent results, try the Colorado State University Crop Variety testing site, at www.csuag.com. Pick Crop Variety reports under the CSU links part of the page. The yields at Wiggins, on a sandy soil with sprinkler irrigation ran 15 to 17 tons for two seasons' total yield.

Other considerations are for disease and insect

resistance, winterhardiness and harvest recovery rate.

University of Wyoming research shows that a 10 pounds per acre seeding rate is ample, when a proper seedbed is made for planting. Purchasing the newer and higher yielding variety makes sense, if you are growing on irrigated land and have ample water to maximize the yield potential. Old varieties, like Ranger, Vernal or common, are better used on dryland situations.

I am a believer in using a nurse crop to start alfalfa. Many university agronomists insist that planting without a nurse crop is better. For protection from wind blown soil, a crop of oats is hard to beat. The secret is to use only 20 pounds per acre of oats when you drill. This thin stand is ample for wind protection, but does not overwhelm the young alfalfa plants. A fall freeze will kill the oat plants out of your stand of hay.

When selecting the field to which you will plant alfalfa, avoid salinity affected fields. Young alfalfa has low tolerance of salinity. Once established, alfalfa can tolerate higher salinity levels.

When the seed salesman gets to going on about his miracle variety, be sure to find out about insect and disease resistance, winterhardiness and recovery rate. We can expect four cuttings, if the harvest is well managed and rains are favorable. Yields of eight tons per acre are common in our test plots. Producer field yields do very well to hit six tons per season.

Longevity of stand is more function of management than genetics. Managing the harvest schedule so that the hay can grow during the period of Sept. 1 to Oct. 15 is critical for restoring the carbohydrate root reserve in the alfalfa plant. Cutting during that period weakens the plant and lets diseases get a foothold. The end result is short stand life. I personally believe the newer varieties put more energy into top growth versus root growth than the older varieties, like Ranger. That would account for the difference in stand life. But we can't sell roots, so the new varieties are a must to maximize profit. We just need to learn how to manage them better.