

Opportunities for Alfalfa as a Grazing Crop in Kentucky

Ken Johnson
Natural Resource Conservation Service

As we think about the possibilities of alfalfa as a grazing crop, maybe we need to look at some of the limitations and where alfalfa may fit into Kentucky producers programs.

When looking at Kentucky's land area of 25 million acres we see that nearly half is in woodland. Of the 12 million acres remaining; about 3 million is in row crops, 2 million in hay, 2 million in non farm uses, and the rest is pasture. That is about 5 million acres in pasture or at least available to the pastured. With at least 7 million acres in hay and pasture and currently only 300,000 acres of alfalfa, there appears to be plenty of room for more alfalfa.

Another possible limitation could be soils. Many farmers may not believe their soils will raise alfalfa. Of the 10 to 15 million acres in farms in Kentucky over 5.5 million is well drained up-land soils well suited for growing alfalfa. Although not all farms will have soils suited for alfalfa, there is vast opportunity to use more alfalfa in our farming operations. Maybe we resource people need to do a better job of soils education.

The land is here and the soils are right, so where does alfalfa fit as a grazing crop? I will talk about four areas I think have great possibilities for alfalfa to be grazed. All involve improved yields and increased profits.

I truly believe the single most important place for alfalfa to be used as a grazing crop in Kentucky is to solve the summer slump. Every cattleman knows gains slow down dramatically in the summer. From about the middle of June to the middle of September cattle do well to hold their own. In fact many studies have shown cattle lose weight during the summer slump. On my farm growing cattle will continue to gain 1.3 to 1.5 pounds per day during the summer. That's at least 100 more pounds of calf in September. Even at \$60 cattle that sixty more dollars per calf and with heavier calves you may be able to sell on an earlier fall market, making even more difference. Plus you will have extra high quality hay to use or sell.

Maybe the second place alfalfa fits into a grazing program is on dairies. Many dairies in our area, especially new dairymen, are choosing to feed hay and pasture instead of corn silage. Dave Forgey and Dane Mercer have records to show that milk levels can be maintained on alfalfa pasture while reducing total feed costs. I believe alfalfa will need to be a part of a dairy grazing program if you are trying to maintain similar milk levels on corn silage throughout the grazing period.

One of the areas I enjoy is the improved gains I have on my calves. Not only do we use alfalfa during the summer, we graze alfalfa most of the growing season. Even when we graze grass fields, we try to have an alfalfa field close by for the calves to creep graze in. We use a single wire fence, high enough for the calves to walk under whenever they please. Creep grazing can add up to 50 extra pounds on your calves at very little additional cost.

The final place I want to discuss is the advantage alfalfa can give you in by increasing the carrying capacity of your farm. Alfalfa can easily double the yield of traditional pastures, allowing you to carry more animals on the same land area. This may let you rent less pasture, cut additional hay, or give your cows more high quality feed to eat. Better feed means more profit.

If every case I have discussed, alfalfa has the capacity to improve the bottom line in cattle operations in Kentucky. I not only see more pounds to sell, we also see the fringe benefits. Cows breed back faster, they are in better condition going into the winter, and the additional pasture allows me to keep my calves longer if the market dictates.

When we talk about all the benefits of grazing alfalfa, it looks like everyone would jump on the bandwagon, but they haven't. Why not?

The three reasons I hear the most are bloat, shorter stand life, and alfalfa is a hay crop. Bloat is a serious concern, however I don't feel that bloat should be a major stumbling block. There are too many ways to manage bloat to reduce the risk. We turn in on alfalfa during the middle of the day when cows are full. Try not to begin grazing on wet days. We try to stay on alfalfa from the start not on and off every few days. Perhaps the most important, we keep our paddocks small enough to force the cows to eat the entire plant, not just the top leaves.

Most of our alfalfa fields are used for both hay and grazing, however we have had fields that were primarily grazing land that have lasted six or more years. Maintaining alfalfa stands is more a payoff of good management than if they are hayed or pastured. Maintaining the pH, high levels of fertility, insect and weed control, and adequate rest periods are just as important in grazing as in hay production. We have found you can reduce the amount of fertilizer by about half when you are harvesting a field primarily by grazing. We usually apply about 35 pounds of phosphate and 150 of potash to our grazing fields.

The final topic I want to discuss is producer acceptance. Most farmers I talk to think grazing alfalfa is just too much trouble. Mow alfalfa for hay and graze grass is much easier. They are right! It is easier. But with the profits being squeezed in both the dairy and beef industry, finding ways to reduce the single largest production cost - feed - will mean the difference between profit and loss. Grazing alfalfa is not for everybody, but those who try it will be the producers who have an edge in cattle business.

I want to challenge you to try a little alfalfa in your grazing program, I think you will be pleasantly surprised how easy it is to incorporate this legume into your system. I also think you will be astonished with the additional weight gains you will get. Not only heavier calves or more milk, but how much more you can produce on the same acreage.