

ALFALFA IN MY BEEF OPERATION

Jay Quisenberry
Winchester, KY

I have had two failures seeding alfalfa in the past few years. Once I seeded into land that had been in no-till corn only one year. I found that fescue came back into that stand of alfalfa and took it in several years. Another time I seeded alfalfa into land that had been in corn for a few years but had not been seeded down properly. I thought I could no-till alfalfa in that piece of ground and there would not be too much competition. But I was wrong again. I realize that both times I could have come back with a Paraquat treatment of some sort and probably made those stands viable. But I didn't do that. The reason I'm telling you about these two failures is because I've been seeding alfalfa using a John Deere Power-Till Seeder. Seeding only in land that has been in tobacco the previous year or two; or in land that has been in corn for at least two years. I plant corn no-till, using Paraquat, Atrazine, and/or Princep. It seems that having corn in for only one year allows too much competition in alfalfa the following year. Two years of corn seems to take care of that. When seeding in corn, seed right in the stalks. I mow the stalks the previous fall, come back that spring, and no-till at the rate of 12-15 pounds of seed per acre. Sometimes it's a little aggravating when you're seeding. You've got to get off and clean the seeder out a little bit, but that's the only trip over the field I use. I haven't had a problem seeding alfalfa behind Atrazine or Princep regardless of what their labels warn of.

When I'm seeding in tobacco ground, I try to sow down my tobacco ground with 1/2 to 3/4 bushel of wheat the previous fall; then in the spring, sometime in late April, power-till seed, once over the ground. After you have seeded, you can actually turn cattle in and let them graze the wheat off. Take the cattle off before they start nipping the buds of that alfalfa. Wait until July 4. Graze it. Or cut it. If the weeds are too big of a problem at that time and the alfalfa doesn't look like its worth baling, I have cut it down and let it lay. I'm talking about ragweed that can be over your head. It looks like you wouldn't get a stand, but my experience has been that you do get a stand without any problem. I haven't used herbicides during the establishment year.

The reason I'm talking about the way I seed alfalfa is I believe that I'm talking about very little land preparation, in comparison to normal procedures. I'm not worried particularly about how smooth the ground is. I prefer it be smooth of course, but that's not a main objective. Because my 1st option on how to utilize that alfalfa is to graze it. I don't have to worry about putting alfalfa up every 35 or 40 days because I intend to graze it if I possibly can.

The other reason I'm talking about how I seed alfalfa is because if you consider the cost of seeding clover and/or orchard grass in the same fields we've been talking about, I believe that the cost of seed is not going to be appreciably cheaper than alfalfa. If you consider a several year period, I think your alfalfa seed, regardless of its initial price, probably will be the cheaper buy of the two. Then if you take into

consideration grazing alfalfa as opposed to baling it, you can say that you need no baling equipment. You don't have the hassle of seeing to it that you get your alfalfa baled 3 or 4 times a year.

If your normal intention would be bale alfalfa; sell what is sellable, and use yourself what isn't sellable. When you're grazing, weather doesn't enter into the problem. There have been very few times when I have felt that I received so much rain on my alfalfa field while I was grazing it that it was absolutely necessary to get the cattle out. Of course this is a judgement you will have to make at the time. I've made some mistakes on this but they haven't been very costly mistakes. Grazing has not, in my opinion, really significantly reduced the stand of my alfalfa. So when grazing, you have no weather loss; from the point of view having your alfalfa cut down and then losing maybe half of it due to rain.

Another thing you can consider when you're grazing alfalfa is that you might want to make the case that you don't need as much fertilizer. Now there's no question that the more potash you put on your alfalfa, the greater yield you will have; and theoretically the more money you make. But you could take the position that it might be cheaper and easier to have more acres of alfalfa; use less potash, be satisfied with 3 ton, maybe a little less, of yield per acre and graze it. It still may be worth having alfalfa as opposed to perhaps a grass for instance. Certainly, instead of clover, if for no other reason than because clover is only going to be there for two years at most. Your alfalfa should be there with minimal management, the way I'm talking about, for five or six years. I've had some stay 7 or 8 years. Though I think it would be obvious to everyone here that during those last few years it would probably be worth re-doing those stands. Of course I don't want to minimize the importance of soil testing, proper fertilization, or proper land preparation if you're planning to do something other than grazing with your alfalfa. I'm talking strictly from the point of view of your first option of use would be to graze it.

Now here are some ways I graze alfalfa. I've got some alfalfa areas that are fenced in set paddocks and that works fine. Frankly, I don't prefer that method. It depends a little bit on your water situation. I like to have an area that has grass in it; so that they have access not only to alfalfa but also to grass. I feel subjectively this can help you from a bloat point of view. Let me say that I haven't had a bloat problem over the years.

I have had two cows die that were grazing alfalfa. I took both to the diagnostic lab and bloat was their determination. But that was over an eight - ten year period running 150-200 cows each year over that period of time. So that's an acceptable loss. I think you could make the case that it's possible that alfalfa wasn't the cause at least in one of those cases of bloat. One case I'm sure was a management problem. I had made those cows stay on the alfalfa too long; it looked like there was something there but it was mostly stems and they got hungry before I moved them.

These are some things you need to think about when you're grazing alfalfa. You want to be sure when you move your cattle from one field of alfalfa to another that

you move them before they get too hungry. Don't worry too much about not cleaning up the field, from the point of view of a few leaves on the stems.

I think you could make a real good case that the value of alfalfa is in the leaf so we shouldn't be too concerned about leaving stems in the field when you graze them. Obviously, when you're baling alfalfa, you've got to have the stem in order to get the leaf. That's not the case when you're grazing. So I'm not too concerned about leaving stems with a few leaves on those stems in the field when I'm grazing. The more mature your alfalfa is when you're grazing it, the harder it is to get the cattle to clean up the field.

I've never used anything but white salt. I've never used any bloat reducing agent. I have depended strictly upon seeing to it that those cattle are not too hungry when I've put them in initially. I try to make sure that the alfalfa itself is not wet when they are put in and that means I try to move them from one field of alfalfa to another around noon. Usually by that time, the leaf surface is dry and the cows have had a chance to graze already that day. They will go on to the new field of alfalfa and graze for a short period of time but not graze for a long period of time. Then of course they come back and graze that evening.

Let me tell you my preferred method of fencing for grazing alfalfa. I've got one field with approximately 35 acres. The borders are in fescue. I can make the borders on one side of that field bigger when necessary or when I feel I want it that way. There are two water tanks in that field. I usually stretch a fence that will include both water tanks in the area they will be having access to first. It also has a considerable amount of grass in it. Depending on how much alfalfa is out there, you will have to judge how long you want them to be there. I usually like them to be there two to three days at most and then move them. So, I've got two water tanks, some grass, and enough alfalfa to last a couple of days fenced in for these 150 to 200 cows. Two to three days later, I look, see if they have cleaned it up sufficiently. If so, I put a fence up in front of the fence I had, making a subjective judgement that I'm giving them two to three days more of alfalfa. Put that fence up first and take the other fence down. I've still got my two water tanks, the first area I gave them, plus the second area I've given them. The cattle walk across what they grazed initially and graze the second portion of alfalfa. Normally if you cut alfalfa, regrowth, depending on weather, ten to fifteen days later would be high enough that cattle could graze it. You prefer this not to happen. If the alfalfa is not too mature, they are going to walk across what they've already eaten and graze the next portion. Now, adjust your field and cattle numbers so that (it's not hard to do after you do it a time or two) the cattle walk across the first piece to graze the second piece, walk across the first and second piece to graze the third piece, walk across the first three pieces to graze the fourth piece. You have the cattle in each piece for two to three days. That's 8-12 days. Say you have another piece that you can't get to. You can make a judgement whether you want to worry about the very first piece which, by that time, may be up high enough they might want to graze it. If you think so, you might want to think of some other method of getting them to graze the last piece, or to bale it. Or maybe do like I do a lot of times. I decide to sacrifice what little bit

they might damage the first piece and let them graze it all. I find that to work the best. That is my preferred way of grazing.

If you get to the point where you can't get all of it grazed that you need, you might want to consider baling. I do that with the first cutting especially.

This brings me to another point. If your first option is to graze alfalfa then you need to be thinking about grazing long before you would think about baling, especially the first cutting. That staggers your alfalfa from early in the season all through the season, especially if you are going to graze alfalfa and only alfalfa.

I've got enough cattle that I can graze all my alfalfa easily because I'm giving them access to the alfalfa. In other words, I don't have enough alfalfa on my farm so that they could graze alfalfa and nothing else and have enough to eat. They are going to have other pasture grazing. When the alfalfa is ready to graze I move my cattle so that they can graze the alfalfa. That doesn't mean that they're locked into the alfalfa, because I have a water problem for one thing; and I have found it's not necessary. Shade might come into play too. However, I'm not too concerned about shade.

That is the main thing I wanted to get across on how you fence. That is, to walk across the previously grazed alfalfa.

I want to mention that I graze a lot of alfalfa in May. I've got a spring calving herd. The bulls are put in on May 20 and taken out on July 20. The cows are being bred while they're grazing alfalfa with a single poly wire fence holding all of those cattle into that field or in place. That means the herd bull is there as well. On one farm in particular, that one strand of poly wire is all that is keeping any and all cattle, not only on the portion of alfalfa that I would like them to have, but on the farm itself. The gate to the house is left open purposely. We haven't had any problem with cattle getting on the road.

Of course those cows, when they're being bred on alfalfa in May and June, have baby calves on them. I prefer not to have two strands of poly wire. Two strands would keep cattle out better, but baby calves are going to get through anyway; not all of them, but some of them and they can't get back. I like to put up one strand of poly wire using step-in posts with the strand in the top hole. That allows baby calves to go under, which is of no consequence. They are going to come back. There's going to be some exceptions, but not many. Your cows won't go through.

There's one more thing I want to address. That is stocking rate. This is something that people think they need to know in advance. I can understand most people's concern. I have learned that very few people are going to have so much alfalfa that they will graze alfalfa and nothing else. In other words, their whole farm is not going to be in alfalfa and that's my case.

It's not necessary to know stocking rate. On top of that it's a hard thing to figure because the majority of your yield is going to be in that first cutting. You can't buy and sell cattle to adjust stocking rate for those kinds of reasons.

I have found that it is unnecessary to know. All you need to do is to give them some alfalfa. If you have found it takes them longer than three days to eat that portion, put the next fence up so that you've given them less.

Those are subjective type considerations and it's not necessary to know exactly how much they are going to eat. I mean in terms in how big an area it is or how many cattle there are. Give them some. See how long it takes them to eat it. Adjust the next time. After a few times of doing this you will know easily how much area to give your cattle the next time.

As far as how much gain to expect, I can't answer with definitive type answers. I don't have those figures. I don't think there's any question there have been several times when we had drought type situations in late July-August when I've had good grazing - grazing that would put gain on cattle. That's not in itself a reason to raise alfalfa from my point of view. I think there could be a case made that a bigger percentage of my cows get bred because they were on alfalfa. I'm not sure of that. I'm not sure that's a sufficient reason to graze alfalfa. I think certainly, with fertilizer application, you could make the case that you get more total feed on that particular piece of ground than you would have otherwise with most anything else. That might be a consideration for raising alfalfa, if you need feed.

Let me end there. I have covered most of the topics that concern me as far as raising alfalfa. I think that covers most of the things that I have been doing myself.