Kentucky Alfalfa Conference: A Team Approach to Alfalfa Education and Technology Transfer

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KENTUCKY ALFALFA CONFERENCE: A TEAM APPROACH TO ALFALFA EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

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Abstract

Alfalfa has played an important role in providing farmers of Kentucky with a high yielding, high quality, persistent forage legume for many years. In 1980, a group of individuals under the leadership of University of Kentucky Forage Extension Specialists organized and implemented the first statewide educational event on alfalfa. This initial meeting gave rise to the Kentucky Alfalfa Conference that celebrated it's twentieth anniversary in February 2000. This annual event has been co-sponsored by the University of Kentucky, Kentucky Forage and Grassland Council, along with other state and national groups including Certified Alfalfa Seed Council, Kentucky Department of Agriculture, Kentucky Beef Cattle Association and Kentucky Pride Hay Growers Association. It has been supported annually by many agribusiness groups. Over the past twenty years, the conference has recorded an average of 250 producers each year. Statewide hectarage of alfalfa has more than doubled and overall quality has been improved. The conference has expanded beyond the state and has become a regional event.

Keywords: Alfalfa, *Medicago*, Lucerne, alfalfa technology, conference, extension education

Introduction

Alfalfa, *Medicago sativa* L., is the most important forage legume grown in the USA. Grown over

a wide range of soil and climatic conditions, it has the highest yield potential and feeding value of all perennial forage legumes. This versatile crop can be used for hay, pasture, haylage, green chop, pellets, cubes, fuel, sprouts and soil improvement. In addition, it is the highest nitrogen fixing forage legume and is an excellent source of nectar for bees. Because of its high yields and quality and versatility, it can be used successfully in many animal feeding programs.

Alfalfa was first grown in the USA in the 1730s with only 0.8 million hectares grown in 1900 (Lacefield 1998). In 1940, there were approximately 4 million hectares in the USA. The number of hectares peaked in 1958 at approximately 12 million. Since 1958, USA hectarage has averaged 10-11 million with 11 million at present (Brown and Brannen, 1999). The USA grows approximately 34 percent of the world's total alfalfa (Lacefield 1998).

Kentucky farmers presently grow around 150,000 hectares of alfalfa and alfalfa-grass mixtures with a potential of one million hectares (Lacefield 2000).

Alfalfa has a very high yield potential when compared with other forage legumes (Ball 1996) (Lacefield 1992). USA average yield was 7.8 Mg/ha in 1998 (Brown and Brannen, 1999). Average yield for each state has always been low when compared with what the best producers are achieving or what state high yield records show (Lacefield, 1998). Average yield in Kentucky is 8.1 Mg/ha with farmers in the Mammoth Cave Area of the state producing 10.1 Mg/ha, and the state record yield without irrigation is 22.7 Mg/ha. The state record for cattle gain is 1516 kg/ha without irrigation or grain supplementation.

In 1980, Kentucky farmers produced approximately 60,000 hectares (Kentucky Ag. Statistics, 1981) of alfalfa and alfalfa-grass. Most of the production was for hay. Quality was low primarily because of late cutting. University of Kentucky studies indicated a potential for 0.8 million hectares of alfalfa in Kentucky. Individuals representing the University of Kentucky and the Kentucky Forage

and Grassland Council along with leading farmers started the Kentucky Alfalfa Conference with an overall objective of placing greater emphasis on alfalfa through a statewide educational conference.

Materials and Methods

In fall 1980, members of the Kentucky Forage and Grassland Council, Kentucky Extension Specialists, a county agent and two farmers met in Louisville, Kentucky to discuss opportunities for alfalfa expansion. Although alfalfa had played an important role in the overall forage program in Kentucky, hectarage and yields were low. This group decided to hold an educational program to promote alfalfa as a high yielding, high quality forage legume and offer research based information for successful establishment, production and utilization. The meeting was held in two locations in Kentucky in January 1981. Attendance, participation and feedback were excellent and a second meeting was planned for 1982. In February 2000, the 20th annual Kentucky Alfalfa Conference was held. On two occasions over the past twenty years (1982 and 1998) the National Alfalfa Symposium was held in conjunction with the Kentucky Alfalfa Conference.

Program planning begins in spring and involves individuals from all sectors of the alfalfa industry. Topics are finalized in summer, the date is set, and speakers are contacted by fall. Each speaker agrees to contribute a proceedings paper which is due by January 15. Facilities are secured at least one year in advance. Exhibitors are contacted in late summer. The conference is usually held in February. The committee strives to have a variety of speakers from the public, private and producer sectors and places great emphasis on practical orientation of each presentation. Exhibits are set up the afternoon prior to the conference. Activities on the evening before the conference range from set-up, hay exhibits, and board meetings to a banquet and program. The conference begins with registration, refreshments, exhibit visitation and silent auction. There is a morning break in the program. Hay contest winners are announced during lunch. A registration fee of 15 dollars is

charged and includes educational materials, proceedings, refreshments and meal.

Results and Discussion

The Kentucky Alfalfa Conference has been held in nine locations across the state during its twenty year existence with a total attendance of over 5000 representing 38 states and six countries. The exhibit hall is usually filled by agribusinesses that supply products and services to alfalfa producers. Fees collected from exhibitors enable conference organizers to keep individual registration fees low. Also, several educational displays are given space free of charge.

Hectares of alfalfa has more than doubled since the conference began in 1981 (Brown and Brannen, 1999)). The present number is expected to double in the next decade (Lacefield, 2000). Yield per hectare has increased from 4.26 Mg/ha in 1975 to 7.8 Mg/ha in 1998 (Brown and Brannen, 1999). Hay contest winners have shown higher crude protein and Relative Feed Values each year (data not shown).

For twenty consecutive years, farmers have attended and participated in the Kentucky Alfalfa Conference because they get up-to-date information on alfalfa production and marketing. Exhibitors continue to support the conference because it provides an opportunity to interact with leading alfalfa producers, educators and research personnel. University personnel and Forage Council members feel it is an excellent educational opportunity with a proven history, effective present and exciting future.

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