GUEST COLUMN

The Flexibility of Alfalfa

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Recent years have seen a decline in alfalfa acres across the country, with many being converted to corn, soybeans, or even almonds in the case of California. But what seems to be forgotten are the many positive attributes alfalfa has to offer, especially compared to these other crops – attributes such as being a perennial crop, requiring less tillage and no annual reseeding. Alfalfa has the ability to add nitrogen back to the soil via nitrogen fixation, as well as to sequester large amounts of soil carbon, improving soil resilience. Alfalfa can also be used to remove large quantities of undesirable nutrients from the soil, including nitrates or heavy metals. It is also a great habitat for wildlife, pollinators, and beneficial insects, with some studies indicating nearly 1,000 different insect species can be found in any given field.

Alfalfa is generally harvested for hay and silage, but in many areas it can be grazed by livestock as well. This is especially important during the off-season, when many farmers are looking to conserve as much forage as possible to make it through harsh winters. Additionally, alfalfa has longer stand persistence in many areas throughout the U.S., particularly in the West, reducing the need to terminate stands. This allows farmers the freedom to focus on other farming activities during typical seeding times.

In addition to these important ecosystem benefits, new technology has provided alfalfa with another benefit: improved flexibility. With the advent of HarvXtra® Alfalfa in 2017, farmers now have greater flexibility in managing their alfalfa. HarvXtra is a reduced-lignin alfalfa, meaning it has increased digestibility without compromising persistence or standability. The main reason reduced-lignin alfalfa provides greater flexibility is its ability to maintain quality later into maturity compared to conventional alfalfa.

In university trials, researchers found HarvXtra Alfalfa harvested 7-10 days later had comparable forage quality to conventional alfalfa varieties harvested on a normal cutting schedule. Farmers can choose to harvest every 28-30 days with improved forage quality for livestock or delay harvest to obtain greater overall yield. Data has consistently shown, with HarvXtra, forage will have increased neutral detergent fiber digestibility, improving nutrient availability without compromising yield potential. If farmers desire increased tonnage, harvest can be delayed several days without compromising quality. In some cases, yields may be increased by 20% by delaying harvest 10 days compared to a normal cutting schedule. This is particularly helpful during summer seasons when the weather may not cooperate with intended harvest schedules. If there is an impending storm, farmers can simply choose to delay harvest without having to worry about negative quality impacts.

Overall, alfalfa is an important crop that should be considered for inclusion in many cropping rotations. It has several benefits other crops cannot offer, which can help improve soil resilience and productivity, as well as livestock performance. Utilizing HarvXtra Alfalfa technology can improve farmers' ability to produce high-quality forage and overall yield, without sacrificing performance, saving time and headaches during the growing season.