

Evaluating Your Alfalfa Today for Next Year's Crop

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With winter approaching, what should you consider when evaluating your alfalfa fields? Should you keep the crop for next year? Should you till up the field and plant a new crop? What focus do you need to consider – tonnage, high quality, or both?

The first step is assessing this year's fields and the environmental conditions to determine your crop's success for next year. If this past year was too wet and your existing alfalfa stands or newly seeded alfalfa fields were affected, they potentially could have issues again next season. Alfalfa stands can be damaged by cold winters and spring frosts, during the reestablishment of fall-seeded alfalfa or normal spring regrowth if the plants have not built up enough carbohydrates in their root systems.

- Evaluate your alfalfa fields this fall to determine how they look now and if they will meet expectations for their yield potential next year. Stands of 20 plants/ft² in newly-seeded crops and at least 12 plants/ft for existing stands should be present.
- When evaluating the stand, look at the individual plant for browning, decay, slow bud growth, and yellowing of the plant. Evaluate the root system, especially the tap root for decay, brown spots, dark spots in the root, discoloration, and stringy roots. Roots should be solid and have a white pith if healthy. Look for thin stands in the field and continue to monitor.
- If planting in the fall of the year or late summer, allow for at least six weeks of regrowth before the first frost to establish carbohydrates in the newly-seeded alfalfa plants to help survive the winter months.
- Reevaluate the fields again in the spring.

To determine your needs, existing field potential, new field product selection, tonnage, quality, and agronomic strengths, especially disease tolerance, should be considered. If planting a new crop this fall or in the spring, product selection is a key component to help create a successful crop. But management decisions will be the primary reason to enhance the product you have selected as well as maintain a field of alfalfa. When it comes to determining what is best or right when planting alfalfa, the basics normally apply. Consider these basic management tips for your success.

- Understand your soil and take a soil test to assess nutrient needs, especially potassium.
- Select products that are high-yielding, have strong agronomic characteristics, and offer disease tolerance, especially *Aphanomyces* 2, as this disease has been occurring more.
- Select products offering winter hardiness and fall dormancies for the field and geographic area, based on the desired length of stand.
- Planting alfalfa with a seed coating can also offer benefits against early diseases and insects and in establishing a stand in dry geographic fields and areas.
- Do not reseed alfalfa into an established crop, as autotoxicity can occur.
- Plant alfalfa into well-drained soils with a 6.5-7.0 pH and ensure a firm seed bed no more than ½" deep. Creating an established stand of your planted alfalfa can help maintain long-term stands.
- Planting rates may vary based on your situation, but a range of 15-20 lbs/ac is recommended for longer stands and higher potential yields.
- Unless additional forage is needed early or winds create an issue, plant alfalfa direct without any cover crops.

- Manage weeds to help create stand establishments quickly. Using a Roundup Ready alfalfa can offer options to manage weeds throughout the growing season as well as offer the ability for a high yield potential.
- Planting alfalfa for quality versus tonnage is determined mainly by management, but certain products, such as HarvXtra which offers reduced lignin attributes, can reduce the number of cuttings, maintain a high yield potential, and add quality, along with reducing costs and labor.

Ask your Bayer agronomist or sales representative for more information about these management tips and products that offer benefits in yield, reduced lignin qualities, and weed management.