



Texas High Plains Supplement to

## Texas Alfalfa Production

Texas Cooperative Extension Bulletin B-5017

Common misunderstandings about alfalfa among prospective growers is 1) they aren't going to get rich growing alfalfa. Yes, there are a lot dairies moving into the northern South Plains and southwest Panhandle, but many of these dairies will probably bring a lot of their alfalfa in from Colorado and other places as they can deliver it more cheaply than what growers here can grow it for. Also, dairies have a high standard for the kind of alfalfa they will feed, and a new grower probably doesn't understand how much work that will mean to achieve high quality. 2) Many prospective growers don't comprehend how to fit irrigation capacity to field size—6 gpm/A or more is recommended, and the equation I walk growers through puts them near 8 gpm/A.

**Notes about 'Texas Alfalfa Production' B-5017 from Texas Cooperative Extension (written by Charles Stichler, Texas A&M—Uvalde):**

This guide has a lot of good information. There are two things, however, that would be considered in error for the Texas High Plains that I must mention:

- 1) ***Irrigation and rainfall per ton of production.*** The guide reports this number at 10" per ton. That was for flood irrigation! Unfortunately, nothing else was said about it. We believe in the Texas South Plains that the number is more likely 6-7" per ton for most growers (perhaps 5-6" toward Farwell, TX, and in the Texas Panhandle), but irrigation efficiency has a big effect. Preliminary results from USDA-Bushland suggest that the number could be as low as 4" per ton of production for efficient irrigation. The number is also lower for drip irrigation. Average evapotranspiration for alfalfa at USDA-Bushland averages about 0.35" per day in June through August, but can top 0.5" on the worst of days.
- 2) ***Seeding rate.*** A firm seedbed is more important than seeding rate, and quality alfalfa seed is, well, you get what you pay for! High end, high quality alfalfas may be \$4/lb., and the cheap stuff may be \$2./lb. In general, I believe the good quality seed of a proven variety is always worth the price (unless you plan on doing a poor job of establishing your crop!). NMSU and Oklahoma State information targets 15 to maybe 20 lbs./A of seed product (if the seed is coated with a clay material, etc., then you need to account for that in planting X lbs./A of pure live seed, or PLS). The Texas guide suggests that experienced growers may use 25 to 35 lbs. of seed per acre to ensure a stand. This could be for a poor seedbed or a combination of sandy soils and/or blowing conditions. Growers should focus on doing seeding right, and in the Panhandle and northern South Plains target 15 to maybe 20 lbs. seed product per acre. South of Lubbock, seeding rates might be around 20 lbs. seed product per acre, and maybe toward 25 lbs. at most if conditions are risky. I know of growers south of Lubbock who have good success planting good quality seed with rates in the teens. Keep in mind

that proper seedbed preparation, e.g. a firm seedbed, to allow good seed placement and seed/soil contact may be just as important, if not more important, than the seeding rate.

**Finally**, a significant number of prospective alfalfa producers in the Texas High Plains consider spring planting, which Texas Cooperative Extension does not recommend. For a summary of concerns regarding spring-planted alfalfa consult “Spring Fever Alfalfa—The Pitfalls of Spring Seeding Alfalfa in West Texas,” by Calvin Trostle (March, 2002).

USDA alfalfa/hay price reports: updated Fridays [http://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/AM\\_GR310.txt](http://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/AM_GR310.txt)

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