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Facts Concerning the Use of Alfalfa in Ontario

In a recent survey of farmers growing alfalfa, it was found that 19% direct seeded and 14% grew pure stands. An average of 2.3 harvests were taken per season and the average life of a stand was about 4 years.

Introduction

Alfalfa is the most important forage crop utilized in Ontario. It is recognized for its high yield and quality, when harvested for hay and silage. However, those involved in research and extension in this province have little information on the actual management of alfalfa on the farm.

To find more information on this crop, Prof. Lloyd Busch, Department of Environmental Biology conducted a mail survey of farmers in 1982. In response to his survey, he received 410 replies, representing 15 different counties in southern Ontario.

Each respondent was asked to indicate the number of acres of alfalfa grown on his farm(s). The average was 67 acres. on a county basis, the respondents from Peel had the most acres (104), while those from Stormont had the fewest acres, averaging 44 per respondent.

Only 77 respondents (19%) used direct seeding, that is no companion or nurse crop. Pure stands of alfalfa, rather than a forage mixture, were being grown by 58 of the farmers (14%). Direct seeding was most popular in Oxford county where 50% of these responding reported using this method. Pure stands of alfalfa were most common in Brant county (30% of respondents).

The average number of harvests per season averaged 2.3. In Dufferin county the number of harvests was lowest (1.7 per year), and in Oxford county, the highest (2.8 per year). Only Dufferin and Grey Counties averaged less than 2 cuts per season.

The average duration of stand was 3.9 or almost 4 years. We have often heard that most farmers grow alfalfa in a rotation and plow it up after 3 years (seeding year plus 2 more years). The results indicate that most farmers leave their stands for one more year (seeding year plus 3 more years). The average duration of stands varied from a low of 3.1 years (Waterloo-Wellington counties) to a high of 4.5 years (Perth). In 8 of the 15 counties surveyed, the average length of stand was 4 or more years*

The results of this survey indicate that:

- (1) The use of a nurse or companion crop at seeding is still the common practice;
- (2) Most alfalfa is grown in a mixture;
- (3) Most alfalfa is cut 2 to 3 times per year;
- (4) The average lifetime of an alfalfa stand is 4 years.

The survey also indicated that most common varieties used are Saranac, Iroquois and Vernal.

A follow up of the survey in 1983 indicated that the majority of farmers applied their manure to corn crops. However a significant number also used manure on forage. There was considerable variation in the rotations employed by growers. The only consistent factor was the use of corn (usually for 2 years) following plowing down of alfalfa.