

ALFALFA – YESTERDAY & TODAY

With its alkaline soils, good irrigation water and lots of sunshine, the lands of California, Nevada and Arizona produce high yields of good quality hay. Alfalfa fields can be found at elevations ranging from 100' below sea level in the Imperial Valley to over 5000' in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada's. The regional crop totals some 1.6 million acres, with California the leader with around 1,000,000 acres.

Alfalfa farming in the region has its own unique history. The first varieties for the nondormant growing areas were probably brought here by the Catholic missionaries from South America and Mexico introducing varieties like Chilean and hairy Peruvian. Dormant varieties came west from the Eastern U.S. where they had been imported from Europe and the Middle East.

Eventually, universities and the USDA began breeding programs in the 1920s and 30s. Ranger, a dormant variety, was released by the Nebraska USDA research team in 1942 and Moapa, a nondormant, from the University of California/USDA in 1950.

Northrup King released its first proprietary release in 1949. It was a semi/nondormant blend of top quality alfalfas. Allenby White, NK research director in California, engineered its release. Named 919 Brand, its name was derived from its guaranteed 99.9% purity (X) its germination of 92% = 919. This was followed by a nondormant blend, 819 Brand, in 1955.

In the 1960s, NK moved its western research farm from Phoenix, Arizona, to Woodland, California, where Dr. Dale Grissom and Bill Vaccaro continued and expanded the alfalfa research program.

In the 1970s, "multiple pest resistance" came into importance. By then, resistance to bacterial wilt, phytophthora root rot, spotted alfalfa aphids and pea aphids could be given to varieties in one plant breeding operation. About this time, Dr. Bill Knipe came aboard as NK's director of alfalfa research. Private companies began releasing new varieties and started to replace universities and the USDA as principle variety developers. State universities and the USDA took on the roles of releasing germ plasm and screening materials for private breeders to use.

Once the private breeders went into full gear, a rapid volume of variety releases came along. Early NK releases were: Resistador, Matador, Amador, Valador and Sundor. Then came Pike, Meteor, Pierce, Condor, Kern and Coronado. Today our lead alfalfas, which will be further described later in this newsletter, are Sedona, Tahoe, Tulare, Sequoia, Reno, Boulder and Expedition. 819 Brand has been kept alive as

NK's blend of the best nondormants available. Just last year, the new top yielding, multiple pest resistant, Sequoia (fall dormancy 8) was brought to marketNK's first release from WL Research.

And so it goes. Yields have increased, persistence has lengthened and higher quality achieved. Alfalfa is an important cash crop in the west and deserves the best of our attention.

ALFALFA MANAGEMENT FOR TOP YIELDS AND QUALITY

A lot has been written about alfalfa management over the years, but the major building blocks of success boils down to the basics. In football, it's blocking and tackling, in alfalfa growing, it's the following:

1. Site selection - Select a soil that has a good chance of producing quality alfalfa hay.
2. Deep ripping of soils to open up the root bed for healthy root development.
3. Pre-irrigation to fill the soil profile.
4. Level the surface to get proper water distribution and drainage.
5. Test soils and apply required amendments and nutrients.
6. Use proper seeding rates, seeding depths and seeding times. Seed into a fine, smooth and level seedbed.
7. Plan for the best cutting management for your ground, for your marketing program and for your equipment.
8. Maximize your profits through sound alfalfa hay marketing principles. Test your hay and market the strengths of those results.

NK ALFALFAS FOR YOUR PLANTING NEEDS

As mentioned earlier in this newsletter, NK has been an important contributor to the success of alfalfa in the west. Again, for the 2003-04 season we will have another strong stable of alfalfas for your planting needs.

Sequoia – Released for the 2002-03 planting season, Sequoia is the first NK Brand variety to come from WL Research. Sequoia is a very high-yielding, 8 fall dormancy alfalfa that excelled in trials at the Westside Field Station and UC-Kearney. A tri-foliolate, Sequoia has an impressive disease resistant package and high relative feed value.

Tahoe – Tahoe is an outstanding multi-leaf variety with excellent adaptation to areas where semi-dormant alfalfa varieties are grown. Tahoe is a 6 fall dormancy and has been used in the nondormant dairy production areas when high quality is a must for lactating animals.

Sedona – Sedona was the first 10 fall dormancy on the market when released three years ago. Sedona is a high-yielding fall dormancy 10 developed for season-long production in the California and Arizona low desert areas. With its extremely fast recovery rate, Sedona provides maximum yield production in a high producing area.

Tulare – Tulare is a multi-foliolate 8 fall dormancy with excellent quality. Tulare has “stand alone” capabilities in certain parts of the west, but its key strength is its ability to blend its positive qualities with other alfalfas to feature a strong hay package.

819 Brand Alfalfa – 819 is long time favorite of nondormant growers of alfalfa. 819 is an 8 fall dormancy which handles the tough soils very well. Made up of a blend of alfalfas, 819 is ideal for a wide variety of soils and growing conditions.

Tulare/819 drill mix or Tulare/Sequoia drill mix – These drill mixes provide the quality of Tulare with the stand persistence and yield of 819 and Sequoia. This concept utilizes the best of two alfalfas with the result being a high yield/high quality hay product.

NEW PRODUCTS

Expedition – This new fall dormancy 5 variety represents a new alfalfa innovation with even faster recovery with high yields. Suitable for Northern California and higher elevations of the west.

Boulder – A new multi-foliolate variety for the western production areas with high yields, rock-solid pest resistance and strong stress tolerance. Boulder is a 4 fall dormancy.

Please contact your local Western Ag Services dealer for NK Brand Alfalfas!

Note: Roundup Ready alfalfas are scheduled for release soon. First release may occur as early as spring 2005.

Corn information for the 2004 planting season will be forthcoming in the January 2004 issue of the Western Agronomic News. Thank you!

SEEDING ALFALFA

Early fall is the best time to seed alfalfa in the low desert valleys of the West. September 15th is usually considered the best time to seed alfalfa. Growers will continue to plant later, up to November 30th in the San Joaquin Valley. Then, after the cold December and early January, seedings will start up again in late January and February.

It would be a good plan to cut and remove top growth from alfalfa by December 1st to avoid sclerotina damage in the San Joaquin Valley. December and January is the worst period for sclerotina white mold infection.

