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No Till Notes: Forages

By Mark Watson, Panhandle No Till Educator

The cattle industry is vitally important to our area's economy and we need to look at alternatives to high water use in the production of forages. The production of alfalfa for feed is one of the higher water use crops we produce in our area, and as water restrictions are placed upon the producers we will need to find solutions to forage production with less water.

One alternative is to harvest fewer cuttings of the alfalfa crop. Instead of the usual 3-4 cuttings, maybe we are only able to get 2-3 cuttings per year. This option would work somewhat satisfactorily since alfalfa will go dormant during dry spells and rebound if Mother Nature supplies some timely rainfall. This option would leave us somewhat short on feedstock if we didn't have alternative feed available.

To supplement the protein shortage that would be created with less alfalfa production a crop such as field peas could be added to the ration. Field peas are high in protein and have proven to work well in cattle rations. The University of Nebraska Panhandle Research center at Scottsbluff has an ongoing study using field peas in cattle feeding rations. There are several grain producers around the Panhandle who are including field peas in their cropping rotations on their dry land farms. The value of a legume in wheat production cropping system is adding nitrogen to the soil and breaking up persistent weed and disease cycles. If we developed a market for these peas in the cattle feeding industry to help supplement protein in the rations, it would be good for the wheat producer and the cattlemen.

Another alternative in forage production is to plant forages which are similar to alfalfa but require less water. I am not an authority on forages, but have been told there are some alternative forages which require less water than alfalfa, but have similar nutritional value. One alternative that I am aware of is forage pea/oat combination that yields high tonnage and has a high protein value. There is also optional forage similar to alfalfa called sanfoin. Sanfoin is more drought tolerant than alfalfa, but has similar nutritional value and may work under limited irrigation.

I think it is important that we begin to look for alternatives to producing forage crops with less water in the near future. Water restrictions will more than likely become tighter and as producers we will need to find alternatives to producing crops with less available water.

Jay Fuhrer, district conservationist with the North Dakota NRCS and Ken Miller, district technician with the Burly County soil conservation district NRCS will be speaking at the Gering No Till Winter Conference on November 18th and 19th. Jay and Ken have done extensive research on cover crops and forages and will share a wealth of knowledge on these topics. They are experts in this area for dry land and irrigated forage production.

Come listen to Jay's and Ken's talks on cover crops and forages cocktails at the Winter No Till Conference on November 18-19 at the Gering Civic Center. This conference will be an excellent opportunity for producers to learn and see first-hand how no till can be started, enhanced, and continued on their place. You'll even have the opportunity to visit directly with these guys during the informal evening reception. See a full agenda and get registered now at <http://www.panhandlercd.org/notill.htm>.