



Spring 2007

# the HAYMAKER

PROGRESS IN ALFALFA RESEARCH AND MANAGEMENT

## Roundup Ready® Alfalfa Seed Sales, Planting Halted by Federal Court

Bad news for alfalfa growers wanting to purchase and plant Roundup Ready alfalfa (RRA) this Spring: the U.S. Federal Court for the Northern District of California has stopped the sale and planting of RRA until the U.S. Department of Agriculture completes an Environmental Impact Statement. However, RRA planted by March 30, 2007, can still be grown, harvested, fed, and sold as forage. This new injunction against buying and planting RRA was issued by the court following a lawsuit brought by the Center for Food Safety and others against the USDA as Geertson Seed Farms, Inc. et. al v. Mike Johanns, et. al.

Despite previous acceptance that RRA posed no harm to humans and livestock, the court upheld its decision that the USDA did not adequately follow procedural requirements as detailed by the National Environmental Policy Act before deregulating RRA. Under the Plant Protection Act, the court maintained that prior to deregulation of RRA the USDA would have to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement in place of the environmental assessment that was completed in Fall 2005.

More than 4,000 farmers in 48 states have planted at least 220,000 acres of Roundup Ready alfalfa since it was approved and brought to market in Fall 2005. What does this recent court action mean to producers who have benefited from growing RRA and see RRA as a valuable tool in their alfalfa production programs?



- Roundup Ready alfalfa is safe and poses no harm to people or livestock; the injunction centers on the way that the USDA deregulated RRA in 2005.
- Both the sale and planting of Roundup Ready alfalfa seed were stopped as of March 30, 2007, by court order.
- Existing acres of Roundup Ready alfalfa planted from product introduction in Fall 2005 through March 30, 2007, are unaffected by this ruling; growers with these fields of RRA can utilize the benefits of Roundup Ready technology for the life of the stand.
- It is not clear when the Environmental Impact Statement will be completed and when RRA will be given the green light for sale and planting. The timeline for re-introduction of RRA should be clearer by this Fall, and we will issue an update at that time.

All of us at **W-L Research** wish to thank our grower-customers for their support during the rollout and introduction of RRA to the market. W-L Roundup Ready alfalfa was the most widely grown brand of RRA in the country up to the stop-plant injunction. In the meantime, we have adequate seed supplies of all our elite, conventional W-L products to meet your planting needs for both Summer/Fall 2007 and Spring 2008. Finally, look for the introduction of several new conventional W-L alfalfas later this Summer. Whether conventional or Roundup Ready, **W-L Research is the Leader in Alfalfa Technology!** ■

### TOP 10 DAIRY STATES IN 2006

	TOTAL MILK PRODUCTION (IN MILLIONS OF LBS)	NUMBER OF COWS (THOUSANDS)	MILK PER COW (LBS)	AVERAGE HERD SIZE
CALIFORNIA	<b>38,830</b>	<b>1,780</b>	21,815	908
WISCONSIN	23,398	1,243	18,824	85
NEW YORK	12,045	638	18,879	107
IDAHO	10,895	488	22,326	707
PENNSYLVANIA	10,742	554	19,390	64
MINNESOTA	8,364	450	18,587	85
NEW MEXICO	7,638	355	21,515	<b>2,088</b>
TEXAS	7,145	335	21,328	453
MICHIGAN	7,100	320	22,188	126
WASHINGTON	5,464	237	<b>23,055</b>	389

**Bold** Denotes #1 In Category



# What Is the True Cost of Planting “Cheap” Alfalfa Seed?

With alfalfa stand establishment and overall production costs climbing every year, producers are always looking for ways to cut back on expenses. Purchasing lower cost alfalfa seed is one way to cut costs. When seed of the newest and best alfalfa varieties might approach \$4 per pound, the cost of older varieties, VNS (variety not stated), or “common” alfalfa seed might be just half that of the best varieties. However, purchasing this inexpensive seed might deliver short-term savings, but long-term profitability will be severely compromised.

## What are the key criteria in choosing the best alfalfa for your operation?

University researchers have shown that the major factors contributing to maximum profitability from alfalfa are (in order of importance):

- **Yield potential** – The yield potential of a variety drives the overall economics of alfalfa production. Newer alfalfas typically yield up to one ton per acre per year more than older or common alfalfas. Additional seed costs for improved genetics can be recovered in less than one production year due to higher yields and greater per-acre income. (From the Table, the per-acre return from investing in elite proprietary seed versus common VNS alfalfa is at least 10:1 for yield alone.)
- **Stand Persistence/Winterhardiness** – Longer stand life (and lower per-acre production costs) is one important benefit

delivered by newer alfalfa genetics. (Cheap seed with shorter stand life costs you at least \$24 per acre; see Table.)

- **Disease resistance** – Newer varieties with Disease Resistance Indexes (DRI) of 30/30 simply blow away the older, unimproved genetics when it comes to root, crown, stem, and leaf health.
- **Forage Quality** – Recent breeding advances in selection for improved fiber digestibility (i.e. W-L HQ alfalfa) have resulted in new varieties with the ability to produce significantly more milk or beef per acre when compared to VNS or “common” alfalfas. The typical elite HQ alfalfa delivers 3% higher protein and 3% lower ADF and NDF compared to common VNS seed; this translates into almost \$45 per acre greater return for the elite, HQ variety over “cheap” seed (see Table).

## FACTORS INFLUENCING DOLLAR RETURN PER ACRE FOR ALFALFA

Source: Undersander, University of Wisconsin

FACTOR	RETURN PER ACRE
Standard Yield (assume 5 t/a yield and 18% CP, 33% ADF, 45% NDF)	\$778
Yield Potential: 0.2 t/a lower yield	– \$50
Persistence: 1 year shorter stand	– \$24
Forage Quality: 1% lower CP; 1% higher ADF and NDF	– \$15
Seed Cost \$1/lb higher	– \$4

The bottom line? Older alfalfa genetics and low-cost VNS or “common” seeds are lower yielding and do not handle stress nearly as well as the new genetics. Under optimum conditions these lower-cost alternatives look okay, but bring on tough soils, drought, disease, tough winters, etc. and they fall apart, resulting in lower yields, shorter stand life, and poor feed value when compared to the newer proprietary alfalfas now available.

Planting older, lower-yielding alfalfas will cost you money (and increase your risk), because per-acre production costs will be higher over the life of the stand when compared to planting new, improved alfalfas. Choosing the best alfalfa seed for your operation should focus on **long-term profitability** of the stand—not short-term input costs. ■

## WL 357HQ Comes Through a Tough Winter With Flying Colors

This past winter, alfalfa in central Iowa suffered some of the worst winter injury/winter-kill observed anywhere in the upper Midwest. Many alfalfa stands in the region were damaged and some were completely winterkilled.

In Boone, Iowa, we had an opportunity to observe firsthand the significant differences that exist among alfalfa varieties for winterhardiness (see photo). This alfalfa comparison was seeded in spring 2004 and harvested four times per season in both 2005 and 2006. Total two-year yield for WL 357HQ was 18.2 t/a; StandFast™ yielded more than one ton less (17.0 t/a). However, as the photo shows, one of the greatest benefits delivered by WL 357HQ is its excellent winterhardiness. This variety was not only high yielding, but also very persistent, resulting in **the best per-acre profitability** of any released variety in this comparison. ■



STANDFAST™

WL 357HQ