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ADEQUATE SEED SUPPLY ASSURED FOR
SUPERIOR ALFALFA VARIETIES¹

By Ward Waterman²

We are now operating an alfalfa seed producing "factory" in the irrigated areas of California, Arizona, Washington, and other western states.

This is a development. You undoubtedly are interested in knowing why this rapid transition has taken place in the last 5 years. For the first time in the history of American agriculture, we can now depend on having an adequate supply of seed for new varieties of alfalfa.

Research work by the USDA and our agriculture colleges established the fact that seed for winter-hardy varieties of alfalfa could be produced in areas having a warm climate and long growing season, such as we have in California.

Get Large Yields per Acre

Thus, the way was paved for remarkable development. Then we discovered in California that by using new methods we could produce a large volume of seed to the acre.

Here is an example that will show you what I mean. After an alfalfa breeder has developed a new variety and has say 10 pounds of seed to be used to increase seed production he has two choices.

He can plant the 10 pounds of seed in a short growing season area in the North. Or he can send the seed to a producer in irrigated regions of the West Coast where we have long seasons.

Suppose this breeder sends it to a northern area where it is seeded at perhaps the rate of 3 acres for the entire 10 pounds. The new variety will be seeded in a nurse crop, and no seed will be harvested the first year.

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The second year there might be a yield of 150 pounds to the acre, or 450 pounds total at the end of 2 years.

Seeded in Rows

But suppose the alfalfa breeder sends the 10 pounds of seed to a seed producer on the West Coast. This farmer would seed in rows permitting weed control and water application. He would likely seed at the rate of half a pound of seed to the acre any time between December and March, and consequently would have 20 acres of seed production as compared with perhaps 3 acres in the northern seed producing area.

The West Coast seed farmer would figure to harvest a seed crop the first year of 400 to 800 pounds to the acre. Say it proved to be 500 pounds, that would be a total of 10,000 pounds of seed for the first year. Then he would harvest a similar or larger amount of seed the second year, or a total for the 2 years of 20,000 pounds while the northern seed producer was getting 450 pounds.

A Factory Operation

It is this miracle of dependable high seed yields that has brought about this revolution of certified alfalfa seed production on the West Coast in the last 5 years.

So you see we really operate an alfalfa-seed-producing factory. We can go into production fast. We can shift from one variety to another in a single growing season. We can turn production of seed for any variety on and off like any other type of factory operation can be turned on and off.

But there are some stark realities which we on the West Coast do have to face. In order to secure this high yield and complete control over production our costs per acre are naturally very high.

In Kern County, the Extension Service found last year that it cost on the average about 27 to 30 cents a pound to put seed in the bag. By the time the seed is shipped east and the retailing costs are paid, farmers are paying 45 to 50 cents a pound.

While this is less than your farmers have been paying over the last 10 years for alfalfa seed of much less value, it is more than they have paid in certain years of big production for the common standard alfalfas.

Water Adds Cost

You would be interested in some of the items which enter into our high costs of production per acre. Water is a scarce item in our country. We pump it from depths that would seem fantastic to a midwestern farmer.

Bees to help with the pollination are a major expense item. Last year, we paid \$24 an acre just for the bee service. Weed control insect control, harvesting, and processing are all major items of expense.

So you can see the position our seed producers are in. They can make available unlimited quantities of the highest quality alfalfa seed this country has ever had. They can do it at less cost to midwestern and eastern farmers than these farmers have paid over the last 10 years, but western growers do have high fixed costs.

If those fixed costs are not covered, western growers will go out of the alfalfa seed producing business. We will be without their services as seed producers and back up against the old problem of feast one year and famine the next for alfalfa seed production. If the consuming farmer is willing to pay 45 to 50 cents per pound for the improved certified varieties, regardless of how cheap the old common varieties may become in year of surplus, the production of the improved varieties in volume can remain assured.

We all realize that we can't build a better and bigger alfalfa program, which many farmer leaders in this area believe must come for the good of agriculture, unless we have a stable supply of high quality seed. The only complete assurance the consuming farmer has of knowing what he buys is the blue tag and the seals of certified seed. Certification is the farmer's only guarantee of high quality seed with genetic purity.