

You Don't Have to be Nostradamus to Predict Future Alfalfa Yields

Alfalfa producers who are curious about their stand's future productivity are welcome to consult a palm reader or a crystal ball, but a far more effective way to tell an alfalfa stand's fortune is by reading the stand.

Current alfalfa yield can be estimated by evaluating the existing stem counts, but producers need to look deeper and forecast a stand's future yield potential by digging some alfalfa roots.

"It's easy to be fooled into thinking a stand is healthy when a grower simply drives by and looks at his alfalfa stand," says CROPLAN GENETICS® Alfalfa & Forage Agronomist Randy Welch. "A plant can be nice and green on top, but it can also have lots of decay or disease stress in the root. This is a sign that the stand needs to be rotated. That's something a grower won't know unless he literally starts digging."

Reading the stand consists of randomly digging several plants from 10 separate locations throughout the field, splitting the crowns and looking for any noticeable discoloration in the roots. Then the plants are scored under the following scale:

- Healthy plant: 0 points
- Some discoloration: 1 point
- Moderate discoloration and rot: 2 points
- Significant discoloration and rot: 3 points
- Discoloration greater than 50 percent: 4 points



The roots of a healthy alfalfa plant are shown above, top (Score: 0), while the roots of a dead plant are shown above, bottom (Score: 5). To view examples of alfalfa roots at other health intervals, visit www.croplangenetics.com/FINDSEED/ALFALFA/ECMD014211.aspx.

- Dead plant: 5 points

Stands with an average root score between 0 and 2 points are thriving and should be kept in production. Stands with average scores between 2 and 3 points should be considered for rotation and those averaging between 3 and 5 points should be rotated out of production. To see examples of what the roots look like at different scores, and for more information about reading the stand, visit www.croplangenetics.com/FINDSEED/ALFALFA/ECMD014211.aspx.

"Growers tend to be reactionary by waiting for a disappointment in terms of rotational decisions," Welch explains. "When a grower waits for his alfalfa yield to decrease before rotating the crop, it means he's now a year or two behind in rotating the stand. Reading the stand is about evaluating the health of the plant and predicting its productivity a year in advance so the grower can avoid the stand's least productive years."

"Your first step to higher alfalfa yields starts with younger, thicker alfalfa stands," Welch adds. "And remember, you get 'free' nitrogen credits when rotating your alfalfa crop to corn."

AgriSolutions™ agronomists and CROPLAN GENETICS® Seed & Agronomy Advisors have long encouraged producers to read their stand. While it's an easy task to perform, many growers ask their local agronomist for assistance so they can get additional recommendations that can enhance stand health and increase yield potential.

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