

ECONOMICS OF WEED CONTROL IN ALFALFA

Hammond P. Ford
Weed Scientist
Rockwood Chemical Co., Brawley, CA

The first and perhaps most important thought is that, if weed control costs more than it returns, it should not be done.

The average yield of alfalfa in Imperial Valley is 7 to 8.5 tons per year depending on whose figures and what year is used. I don't think that there is such a thing as an average price. In talking to several growers, the figure most commonly used as a cost of production is \$50.00 a ton. This includes the cost of everything including roadsiding. The University of California farm advisors office has arrived at a cost of \$56.54 a ton based on an 8.5 ton yield. This figures out to be a cost of about \$480.00 per acre. This points out that growing alfalfa is not an inexpensive pastime. However, with good management alfalfa can return a good profit to the grower.

The most important phase is good stand establishment. This can be facilitated with good weed control practices. There is no one set of rules for weed control. The weed problems present in each field must be known and considered before a plan of action can be formulated. Much of the time preplant herbicides are not a good investment. However, there are problem weeds and problem fields that are alleviated through the use of preplant or preemergent herbicides. Most weed problems can be controlled through the use of post-emergent herbicides. The preplant or preemergent herbicides include Balan[®], Tolban[®] and Eptam[®]. Early postemergence herbicides are 2,4-DB, IPC and Kerb[®].

When a good stand is established, it makes continuing weed control much easier. It is extremely difficult to keep alfalfa weed free without the help of the competition from the hay.

To control winter weeds in established hay fields, CIPC has been a big help. The best results have been obtained with water runs in later November or early December cuttings. This is followed by a second water run on the January cutting when needed. It is needed if weeds are present or in thin stands of alfalfa.

These are followed with spring applications of Eptam[®] applied as a water run. The number of applications of Eptam[®] depends on the problems in the field being treated. One important point is not to apply Eptam[®] once and expect all your troubles to go away. Actually if Eptam[®] is not applied to two succeeding cuttings of hay, the first application is wasted. For nutsedge control, it takes an application of Eptam[®] to each cutting from February to October. For water grass control, an application on the March and April cuttings, skip May and apply again in June and July. For bermudagrass control it takes about the same number of treatments as it does for nutsedge.

This sounds like lots of herbicide use, and you may wonder if the expense is justified. There are several benefits from a good weed control program. First, the price of clean hay is always higher than for weedy hay usually from \$5.00 to \$10.00 per ton. Second, production is higher from a clean field than from a weedy field. Yield increases can amount to several tons per acre. The life of the stand is also benefited by keeping the field weed free, so renovation can be eliminated and the cost of stand establishment can be prorated over four or five years instead of two or three. Last but not least, a reduction in weed population in the field is achieved by keeping the hay weed free. Where nutsedge has made row crops virtually impossible to grow, control has been good enough to allow row crop production again. Also by reducing the weed population while in hay, following crops can be grown with less herbicides and fewer weeds to plague the grower.

These are some of the factors that enter into the economics of weed control in alfalfa. However, for weed control to work and benefit you the grower, your program must be planned and tailored to fit your fields, problems and conditions. A lot of money is wasted on weed control when a planned program is not followed.