

IN ORDER TO BE HEARD ONE MUST HAVE A VOICE! THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANIZING ALFALFA GROWERS IN CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

Many commodities have strong organizations to meet the needs of growers. The major exception in California is alfalfa and forage crop industry, which has no statewide commodity group. The alfalfa industry is a large and economic important factor in agriculture in California. We face a number of challenges in the future, including water availability, pest control, and regulatory issues. We as alfalfa growers should develop a focused, statewide organized effort to respond to these challenges. A proposal for the formation of such a body is provided.

INTRODUCTION

In an ever-changing and overly complex business and regulatory environment, farmers are being forced to wear many hats. No longer is it possible to focus only on increasing yields and growing more profitable crops. Pressures on farmers and the farm industry in the west are riddled with challenges in addition to the regular duties of growing a better crop.

To address these concerns many agricultural industries have formed organizations to deal with these new regulatory and environmental challenges. The peach, rice and raisin industries to name a few, have formed groups that are addressing key issues concerning and in some cases threatening the future of their businesses. Some of these are a fraction of the size and importance of forages.

Can a similar type organization benefit hay and forage in the west or more specifically in California? Do alfalfa and other forage crops have statewide problems and challenges that are important enough to address or that could possibly jeopardize the industry in the future? These are questions that each individual that is growing or depending on forages should ask yourself when considering the value of a new alfalfa and forage organization.

IMPORTANCE OF FORAGES

Initially reviewing some important industry statistics is helpful in analyzing the size and value of forage in the state. California has between 950,000 and 1,050,000 acres of alfalfa and an additional 500,000 acres or-so of "other hay". Alfalfa is the premier forage crop, but other crops such as oats, wheat, barley and triticale grown for silage or hay, sudangrass grown for export, and corn grown for silage, and bermudagrass also make up a sizeable portion of forage acres in the state. We are also still the most important alfalfa seed producing state. How do these numbers compare with other crops? Surprisingly enough, these acreage statistics indicate that forages, taken as a whole, represent the number one use of land in the state of California.

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California is also noted for its exports of agricultural products due to the wide variety of crops and access to worldwide markets through its many ports. Agriculture is responsible for 11.7 billion dollars of annual exports, almost half of our total value of production. Depending upon the year, between 5-12% of California's hay production is exported. Agricultural exports are critical to the balance of trade in the United States as well as the balance of containers to ports around the world. Japan alone imports a tremendous amount of baled hay, cubed hay, and straw, and is the major market for Western exported hay products.

Hay and forage are extremely important to the state economically. An estimated \$813 million is generated directly from hay sales each year, creating a large number of jobs in hay harvesting, hauling, as well as support industries. The majority of hay is sold within the state to support the dairy industry. Dairy is the state's largest agricultural industry representing \$3.7 billion in annual sales. Most of the state's 1.3 million cows consume from less than a ton to over 3.5 tons of hay annually, which represents 25% of a dairy's total cost. Growth in California dairies has been tremendous the past 20 years from about 800,000 cows in 1976 to 1.3 million in 1996. The milk yield per cow has also increase tremendously, partly due to better-quality alfalfa. The dairy industry as a whole has increased production by over 50% in the past 10 years alone. In addition to jobs created on dairies themselves, the industry creates 14,500 jobs statewide in milk product processing. When considered as interdependent industries, the California dairy-forage system is worth 4.5 to 5 billion dollars each year, perhaps more.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNICATION

Given the above statistics, certainly hay and forage is extremely important to the state's economy. However, in many cases agriculture, and hay and forage especially, is looked down upon. Misrepresentation or lack of representation of the industry's benefits has resulted in a public impression that agriculture is an environmental hazard. Much of this concern centers around food safety, water uses, and destruction of the environment. Farmers, over and over, try to explain that we have the safest food in the world, truly use water in a beneficial way, and are the most sincere stewards of the land and its surrounding habitat. Despite these truths our voice is not heard! In the case of forages, the question is: Do we have a voice to be heard?

GOALS OF AN ORGANIZED EFFORT

In order to have an effective statewide hay and forage organization, common goals must be established. If these established goals are important enough to the survival of the industry then there is reason and substance behind the organization that will ultimately result in its success. Nobody has time to further impact an already busy schedule unless the purpose and results of the organization are beneficial to their profitability or critical to their future.

A few common goals critical to all hay and forage growers are 1) increase profitability through reduced regulation and improved research, 2) communicate effectively to the uninformed public the benefits of hay and forage to the state's economy and environment, and 3) establish a unified position to dispel the myths that hay and forage are low value crops that are wasting water. Each of these important issues requires a strong and centralized voice.

Regulation in any business is inevitable. However, the way in which that regulation is written and implemented may mean the difference in choosing to farm one crop over another. Issues such as the Clean Air Act, Endangered Species Act, and property rights are only a few critical concerns for farms today. How many of the fertilizers and chemicals being used today will be available tomorrow? The state EPA estimates that 50% of those available material will be gone in 5 years. Should we have some input on this? Will anybody ask us for our input? Who would they go to at this time to ask for input?

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

Research is another area that needs more support and funding. Over the past 10 years the number of researchers and funds specifically allocated for hay and forage has been reduced drastically. In Imperial Valley, which represents 25% of the state's acres, there has been no alfalfa specialist for several years. Do we as an industry make our needs known to the University as effectively as we should? As people retire or relocate, positions have been consolidated or left vacant. A unified body speaking on behalf of hay and forage once again could have communicated the importance of this research and perhaps some of these positions could have been retained.

A GULF OF UNDERSTANDING

As the nation's population continues to grow, we recognize that the urban areas are growing and the rural areas are shrinking. This is especially true in California. People are further removed from their food source and consequently lack an understanding of the process of making food. These same people rely on movies, television, and the media to tell them a story about agriculture. Is this the voice we want them to hear?

Alfalfa and other forages actually have a long list of beneficial attributes that need to be communicated to these people. The fact that alfalfa has a self-fixing nitrogen root, or that the alfalfa tap root helps to naturally aerate the soil are important benefits of the crop. The fact that 1 ½ million acres of open space are created for up to 5 or 6 years at a time is critical to the survival of our wildlife. Certainly these same uninformed people can not argue that an 80 acre field of alfalfa provides more wildlife habitat than an 80 acre field of houses. Who would have thought that an alfalfa crop requires the employment of a farmer and his crew, an equipment salesman, a fertilizer salesman, a public utilities company, a hay salesman, a trucker and loader, a dairyman and his crew, and a processing facility and their crew. How are we communicating this important chain of employment to the public? Who can we call to make sure this important message is being communicated?

Probably most critical to the industry's future today is the availability of water. The state requires by law that water be used "beneficially." This loosely defined term has been exploited by the best of our nation's attorneys and resulted in water wars that leave the minority group of farmers with little to say and in some cases with little water. In Marc Reisner's widely read revised and updated version of Cadillac Desert, the closing pages of the updated afterword focus on alfalfa and cows as being the culprit to all the state's water problems. To quote Reisner from his book:

“In California, for example, enough water for greater Los Angeles was still being used in 1986, to raise irrigated pasture for livestock. A roughly equal amount—enough for twenty million people at home, at play, and at work—was used that year to raise alfalfa, also for horses, sheep, and (mainly) cows.”

“To raise alfalfa, you have to dam, dewater, and otherwise destroy the rivers that many of the tourists come to fish, to raft, or simply to see. The hydroelectricity that could be generated down river by water used to raise alfalfa is potentially worth more than the crop.”

“In an arid or semi-arid region, you can irrigate low-value, thirsty crops such as alfalfa and pasture grass only if you have cheap water—if your fields are riparian, or if your dams and aqueducts were built decades ago, or if you get your water subsidized by the taxpayers, as one of every three of the far West’s full-time irrigation farmers does.”

It is interesting to note, however, that the rice industry, which Mr. Reisner recently decided to endorse is recognized as being a benefit to the environment.

“When you added cotton (a price-supported crop worth about \$900 million that year) to alfalfa and pasture, you had a livestock industry and a cotton industry consuming much more water than everyone in urban California and producing as much wealth in a year as the urban economy rings up in three or four days. (Rice, another crop that needs lots of water, consumed more than the entire Bay Area, but the state’s rice acreage supports much of the Pacific Flyway on waste grain and an enormous winter production of invertebrate food, so I am leaving the rice acreage alone.)”

How did the rice industry, also earlier targeted as a water waster, make strides towards changing their image? They had an organized voice and communicated their message effectively communicating the benefits of rice to wildlife and using an effective spokesman to help communicate their message.

Do we have similar beneficial message to communicate? I think we do. Through what body should be communicate that message? At what point does agriculture, or more specifically alfalfa and forage have voice?

In 1917 Los Angeles wanted to grow. When faced with a need for water to support this growth the following took place:

“As the drought intensified, Mulholland (head of the Los Angeles Water District) begged the city fathers to end their abject defecation of growth. The only way to solve the city’s water problem he grumbled aloud, was to kill the members of the Chamber of Commerce. When he was ignored, he began to regulate irrigation practices in the San Fernando Valley. First he forbade the irrigation of alfalfa, a low-value, water-demanding crop; then he prohibited winter planting.”

Again, today with 10 times as many people in the state, the state's urban water districts and businesses are trying to manipulate statistics and convince the public that agriculture is wasting water and growing unnecessary low-value crops. Are they really low-value, do they have no benefits to the state? Do the cities need to continue to grow beyond their existing bulging and sprawling states? Housing developments are the "final crop" and we loose forever not only agriculture but open spaces and wildlife habitat when "low value" crops are developed.

The formation of a hay and forage could be established as a part of an existing national group such as a California chapter of the American Forage Grasslands Council or a special regional or state group could be started. Whichever group more effectively addresses the industry concerns would most likely be the best. The state could be broken into three or four groups 1) desert, 2) central valley's, and 3) mountain regions. The Central Valley could be split depending upon the wishes of the group. These subgroups (with approximately four representatives each) could meet as often as they felt was necessary, but at least quarterly. Three times annually a main elected body representing each region would meet. The meetings could take place at each region once each year. Other means of communicating would be by teleconferencing and the internet so as not to require as much time as being present for a formal meeting. Members could receive a newsletter supported by the California Alfalfa Workgroup at UC Davis summarizing the activities of the subgroups and the main body.

Without an organization to communicate these concerns effectively, the industry becomes an easy target for critics and extremists. Extremists are more effective with no opposition. Currently the hay and forage industry has no such centralized body. With no centralized body we have no voice and with no voice we have no strength and with no strength we will soon have no industry. For an industry that has over 1 ½ million acres and an economic impact of over 800 million dollars, there is no question it needs a voice. The success of the annual Alfalfa Symposium is a testament to the importance of hay to many farmers' bottom line. Let's act now and let's protect it now!!!

PROPOSAL FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF A STATEWIDE ALFALFA & FORAGE ORGANIZATION

The following is an outline of some ideas for forming a state-wide organizational structure for alfalfa. These are written for discussion purposes only; each aspect is open to discussion, modification, and improvement. This is not a finalized document, and additional comments and suggestions are welcome.

NAME: California Alfalfa and Forage Council

PURPOSE: The purpose of this organization would be to:

- 1) Educate the public about the importance and role of alfalfa and forages to food production and to the agricultural economy of California, and their role in cropping systems and the environment.
- 3) Exhibit leadership for the industry as a whole, and act as a communication link with membership about issues of vital importance to the alfalfa and forage

industry.

2) Support research on alfalfa and forages on issues vital to these crops as deemed appropriate and necessary by the membership.

JUSTIFICATION: There are a wide range of issues which face alfalfa, California's #2 field crop. Forages are likely to be in short supply in the state for years to come. At the same time, broader issues of water availability, pesticide, and other key production issues challenge the industry. Many people (legislators, press, lawyers) who will make decisions affecting the livelihood of the state's thousands of alfalfa and forage growers have very little appreciation of the important role they play. This voluntary organization would act to educate the public using a range of methods to assure that the story of forages is communicated. It could act as representatives to dairy and other organizations to work on issues of common interests. At the same time it would act as a conduit for information to assure membership of latest information about forages through newsletters and other means. The Council would promote research on issues of vital importance to the alfalfa industry. Issues which are of interest only to alfalfa and forage growers typically are not well addressed currently. There is no framework for articulating or translating the research needs of the industry into reality. This organizational framework would allow a focus on 1. Education, 2. Communications, and 3. Research.

SCOPE: The organization would be oriented towards the needs of growers, consumers, and support industry related to alfalfa and other forages. Alfalfa would likely take precedence since it is the most important forage in California.

AFFILIATIONS: The California Alfalfa and Forage Council could choose to be affiliated with national organizations such as the American Forage and Grasslands Council. The AFGC has been in existence for 50 years and publishes a newsletter for its members to keep them abreast of national issues related to forages. The affiliation fees are minimal and primarily cover the costs of the newsletter. They hold national meetings each two years where recent advances in alfalfa and forage research are presented.

MEMBERS: Membership would be open to any party with affiliation and interest in alfalfa and forage crops. Membership would be made up primarily of alfalfa growers and interested dairy producers, but also include hay brokers, PCAs, Seed and Chemical Company Representatives, Banks and other support industries, State Government employees, as well as UC Cooperative extension and research personnel. It is anticipated that the leadership should primarily come from alfalfa and forage growers. However, any individual with a strong interest and commitment to forages should be encouraged to join.

STRUCTURE: California is a large state with diverse needs in forages. The organizational structure should reflect this. Representative Subgroups could be set up to represent different production areas, and could be divided into 3 or 4 groups

statewide:

1. *Intermountain Region*- This would likely include all of those areas north and east of Redding, and include those areas with similar conditions in more southern areas (eg. Inyo/Mono).
2. *Sacramento/N. San Joaquin Region* The central Valley is quite large and could be divided into a N and S section. It's not clear exactly how to divide it, but a line somewhere around Stockton & the delta could be drawn.
3. *S. San Joaquin Region*. The southern San Joaquin often faces different issues than those important in the Northern S. Joaquin or Imperial.
4. *Desert Region*. The desert regions of Imperial Valley, Palo Verde Valley, and Coachella Valley would be included in this region.

The High Desert region could be combined with either the Desert Region (#4) or the S. San Joaquin Region. Coastal areas (which make up about 1% of CA production) could be affiliated with the closest of the 4 regional groups. Representatives to the State could be elected from each of these areas.

GOVERNANCE: Should be under the control of the primary stakeholders: alfalfa and forage growers. Representatives from each of these regions would form the statewide Council Governing Board (or board of directors).

For day-to-day operations, a wide range of possibilities are available, ranging from purely volunteer to half-time to full time employees, depending upon the wishes of the group and desired funding level. One half-time employee might be appropriate initially: A statewide executive director or coordinator or a part time secretary. This, of course, would be dependent upon the wishes of the membership and the desired level of dues or spending.

STATUS: It is anticipated that, if chartered, this would be a non-profit organization. As such, it would be limited to educational and research functions, and excluded from lobbying. This is a voluntary organization.

FUNDING: Funding could be based primarily upon annual dues of members and donations. A range of membership amounts could be established (individual, corporate, lifetime, etc.). This should be a modest amount (eg. <\$100). Conceptually, these can be considered in two ways: 1. Educational, Communication, and Leadership based upon an annual dues amount, and 2. Research. A separate research fund could be established by the membership to meet the research needs of the four regions as well as for state-wide issues. These could be based upon acreage & average production of members in addition to donations. This would be an amount in addition to the yearly dues.

BENEFITS: 1. Knowledge that forage growers and industry representatives are taking steps to benefit their own industry.
2. Increased communications on both a national and state and regional level about

issues of importance to forages, including technical information and research results.

3. National Newsletter “Forage Leader” from the AFGC delivered to each member if affiliation with AFGC is established.

4. Statewide Newsletter “California Alfalfa and Forage Review”, developed by UC Cooperative Extension. Subscription to these two newsletters would be folded into the membership of the CAFC. This will contain recent updates on issues such as forage quality, research advances, as well as current news and issues of importance to growers and industry members.

5. Ability to address broader public issues related to alfalfa and forages in a concentrated, organized fashion as they arise.

6. Capability to address research issues of vital importance to alfalfa and forage growers as they arise.