

# **DYNAMICS OF ALFALFA SEED SUPPLY: ON THE TAG AND IN THE BAG**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Choosing alfalfa seed is the most important decision a producer makes in terms of his or her alfalfa crop. The seed-buying decision is a critical one in the overall planning process. The American Seed Trade Association's (ASTA) motto, "First the Seed" says it all. Everything starts with the seed.

Each and every bag of alfalfa seed a producer purchases has on it an analysis tag. Let's analyze what's on that tag and behind each bag of high quality, proprietary alfalfa seed purchased by producers. One will find an alfalfa seed supply that is truly dynamic.

## **SEED R&D**

There are several steps involved in bringing the very best alfalfa seed to the producer. Prior to actual seed production, a lot of time and money goes into seed research and development. It takes up to six or seven years from the time the alfalfa breeder makes the first cross until the variety is ready to go to the seed grower. The cost to get a seed variety to this stage is from \$300,000 - \$500,000. This cost will be even higher for transgenic alfalfa.

## **PRODUCTION**

In regard to seed production, 95 percent of the country's alfalfa seed is grown in the western states of Nevada, California, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Wyoming, Utah and Colorado. A large percentage of the California seed production is exported.

Alfalfa seed production is a very cost-intensive, high-skill operation. While costs can vary, here is an estimate of the costs per acre to grow alfalfa seed:

Land Preparation and Labor	50 / acre
Irrigation	100 / acre
Herbicide applications	75 – 100 / acre
Insecticide application	75 – 100 / acre
Bees for Pollination	250 – 300 / acre
Land Cost	\$650 / acre

As one can see, alfalfa seed is an intensive crop to grow, with many different steps that all have to come together to assure the alfalfa producer he is purchasing a quality product.

For the producer, whether he is growing alfalfa for hay, silage, or other use, it is and economical, high margin crop. Grown on approximately 24 million acres, alfalfa ranks fourth nationally behind corn, wheat and soybeans. It has double the acreage of cotton and, although there is no published crop value for alfalfa, the estimated national value is over \$6 billion.

## **THE ALFALFA COUNCIL**

U. S. Alfalfa producers need a resource for alfalfa information and they can find it in the Alfalfa Council, a national non-profit organization promoting a better understanding and a wider use of quality alfalfa. Formerly known as the “Certified Alfalfa Seed Council,” the organization takes pride in serving the industry “from seed to feed.” The Alfalfa Council can be called the voice of alfalfa for its role as the only organization promoting solely alfalfa on a national basis.

Its mission is to increase the productivity from the producer through the end user by increasing awareness and knowledge of the best practices and new technologies in the areas of genetics, agronomic practices, nutrition and marketing for alfalfa.

The Council is governed by a Board of Directors composed of representatives from seed companies, seed growers and ex-officio members from the California Crop Improvement Association and University Cooperative Extension Service.

The Alfalfa Council has a unique relationship with land grant universities throughout the United States. An Advisory Committee, composed of leading Forage Extension Specialists from the major alfalfa utilization states, meets with the Council at least once a year to review the status of alfalfa production and suggest future projects. Most Council materials and programs have resulted through the cooperative efforts between the Council and its Advisory Committee.

One of the Alfalfa Council’s most successful and unique programs is its ongoing Alfalfa Intensive Training Seminar (AITS).

Alfalfa growers will find materials from the Alfalfa Council useful. For more information, visit The Alfalfa Council web site at [www.alfalfa.org](http://www.alfalfa.org).

Alfalfa needs a strong voice in US agriculture and the Alfalfa Council strives to be that voice.

When purchasing a bag of alfalfa seed, producers need to remember what’s behind that tag and what went into producing the high quality seed in that bag.