

WHY THE ALFALFA INDUSTRY SHOULD REACH OUT TO A NON-AG AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Alfalfa growers historically have been concerned only with production issues. However, it is painfully obvious to most of us that we must be engaged with important discussions about environmental, regulatory, land and water issues with those from the non-agricultural sector. The California Alfalfa and Forage Association was initiated in 1998 partly to fulfill this role. There are several recent publications that CAFA has sponsored: ‘Alfalfa Queen of Forages’ poster and ‘Alfalfa, Wildlife, and The Environment—the importance and benefits of alfalfa in a technological age’, a 24-page full color booklet. Both are meant to reach out to a non-ag. audience about alfalfa’s many positive attributes. Although most non-ag people take food production for granted, it is up to those of us in production agriculture to reach out and educate them about the importance of these crops to their daily lives and to the environment.

Key Words: CAFA, water policy, wildlife, environment, regulation

INTRODUCTION

Why should a forage producer be concerned with public opinion regarding our industry? It is easy to say “just leave me alone and let me farm”, but in the reality of today’s political climate, this is no longer a choice. We are being questioned about alfalfa and forage’s land and water use and the potential of land, air, water, noise and dust pollution resulting from their production. If we don’t care enough to answer our critics, we play into their hands and allow them to pervey their untruths about our industry.

OUTREACH EFFORTS

Recently, the California Alfalfa and Forage Association (CAFA) completed the task of sponsoring and producing two publications designed to address these issues. First, we developed a poster brochure entitled, “Alfalfa, Queen of Forages”. On the front is a compilation of pictures displayed in a very pleasing format depicting the various ways we enhance wildlife habitat and protect our soil. On the back is a brief discussion of the history of alfalfa and its numerous benefits. Alfalfa’s importance to wildlife, how it sustains and protects the soil, solves pollution problems, its efficient use of water and how it contributes to the value of open space are all included. It is our intent to distribute this brochure widely, and it is the least expensive of the two publications.

The second publication is a 24 page booklet entitled, “Alfalfa, Wildlife and the Environment”. This is an in-depth discussion of many of the same ideas and issues covered in the poster brochure. Both publications have been authored by Dan Putnam, Ph.D. with contributions from members of the UC California Alfalfa Workgroup, Aaron Kiess, Executive Director of CAFA and Jim Kuhn, Imperial Valley grower and member of the CAFA Board of Directors. Jim is the source of many of the beautiful photographs used in both publications. Dan has been the main force behind this endeavor and his

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devotion to its completion has resulted, unfortunately, in one less issue of the Alfalfa and Forage Review for the year. The booklet is designed for use by policy makers, government officials, the news media, farm advisors, teachers, students and anyone else as a reference material for information about alfalfa. We are deeply indebted to Dan and his fellow authors for putting this information together in such an attractive, pleasing manner. Copies of both publications will be available at the CAFA exhibit during the Symposium at Modesto or by contacting CAFA

THE QUANDARY OF PRODUCTION AGRICULTURE

Why go to all this effort? As our society becomes more disconnected from production agriculture, people forget how food is produced. People go to the supermarket where there is an abundance of food pleasantly displayed for them to choose. Many don't have a clue as to how it is produced and probably could care less as long as it is plentiful.

Recently, I read a startling article in the Oct. 15, 2001 issue of the "Insight" magazine. It underscored the fact that our nation and its leaders take our food supply for granted. Bronius Cikotas, a member of the Florida based American Civil Defense Association, stated "The total food supply for the nation is about five days. We are talking about the total food supply - what's available in supermarkets and on trucks going to supermarkets and whatever people have at home. We've been trying for sometime to get the government to take on the threat to agriculture. When the National Security Council wrote Presidential Decision Directive 63 on preserving critical infrastructures in 1998, it did not even have food on the critical list. We finally got them to put it in eight months after the list came out." I point this out just to make you realize that not only does the general populace take our food supply for granted, so do our government planners.

I think it behooves those of us whose very livelihood depends on the successful production and marketing of our food products to take this phenomenon very seriously. It is our duty to tell our story of how much effort is expended and the financial risk involved in bringing an abundant, affordable food supply to the American consumer. If we don't, our access to land and water necessary for producing food could be at risk. At present, the challenge to our use of these resources is very real! In the Sacramento Valley, currently, there is a concerted effort by government agencies and environmental interests to convert productive farmland to wildlife habitat. Also, we all know too well what happened in the Klamath Basin last summer. We must take these situations seriously or these interests will grind us up, putting us out of business. I'm here to tell you we are in an all out fight to save our industry, and we shouldn't count on our government to help. I'm sure there are others in the audience who can tell of similar situations.

A PART OF OUR MISSION

The mission of the California Alfalfa and Forage Association is to address these issues. This is a grower-led, grower-run voluntary organization. Finally, we have the wear-with-all to use as we move forward. You can help us get this information out if you would make sure that your area's Congressmen, members of the State Legislature, your County Boards of Supervisors, your local newspapers, school teachers and anyone else who could use these publications are given a copy. I now ask you to support us with your membership and, if you are so inclined, a donation to help defray the cost of these publications. It would be greatly appreciated. Once again, if you would like copies of the

two publications, please contact Aaron Kiess, CAFA Exec Director at 415-892-0167 or visit our website at www.mother.com/~cafa/