



Numerous university trials over the past 20 years have shown that using a nurse crop with spring-seeded alfalfa can reduce the yield of the alfalfa stand for several years past the seeding year. Still many producers feel the need to use a nurse crop when spring-seeding alfalfa because they need as much forage as possible off of the newly seeded acres in the seeding year.

There are several steps that you can help your customers take that will give them the extra yield of the nurse crop without harming the alfalfa too badly. The first and most important step when using any of the small grains or small grain mixtures (like our Milk Max) is to cut the seeding rate in half. This rate is a good balance of giving good ground cover to suppress weeds and prevent erosion while not being too thick and smothering the alfalfa seedlings.

Second, be sure the farmer knows the value of harvesting the nurse crop on time. It is important to harvest small grain nurse crops at the boot stage. This makes sure the forage is the highest quality, but also removing the nurse crop early exposes the alfalfa seedlings to sunlight sooner. If the farmer waits until soft dough stage, it can be as much as three weeks later at harvest and those three weeks could have given the alfalfa a good chance to grow and get well established before the summer heat comes.

Recently, a Byron Dealer and I have been discussing the use of Green Spirit Italian Ryegrass as a nurse crop. It certainly is a good crop to use as a nurse crop, but even more care must be taken to reduce the seeding rate than with small grains. At our winter meetings in Wisconsin, Dr. Dan Undersander shared some information that he has gathered over the past few years in Wisconsin showing that Italian Ryegrass can reduce the alfalfa stand at rates higher than 2-4 lbs per acre when seeded with alfalfa. Also be aware that Italian ryegrass has better regrowth potential than small grains so if the customer expects pure alfalfa after the first cutting of the nurse crop, Italian Ryegrass is pretty likely to show up in later cuttings. In most cases, we think that is a good thing, but the guy who is trying to sell pure alfalfa hay may not agree!

For farmers that are more concerned with getting the highest possible yield per acre rather than how many trips they make across the field, another scenario to think about is to sow the small grain crop alone at the full rate in the spring. This crop can be harvested for high quality silage and then alfalfa can be summer-seeded without a nurse crop. By next year, the farmer will have a fully productive alfalfa stand with no chance of suppression from the nurse crop. Also he would have gotten maximum yield from his small grain this spring. We recommend Tritcale Plus Spring in this scenario to get massive amounts of high quality feed.