PUTTING ALFALFA WITH HARVXTRA® TECHNOLOGY TO THE TEST

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What more can be said about alfalfa with HarvXtra® technology? In the past few years, most alfalfa meetings or conferences have featured a speaker talking about reduced lignin or HarvXtra technology. Granted, it is very exciting technology which can revolutionize alfalfa for growers and livestock producers alike. However, it is now time for us to hear from alfalfa growers, dairy farmers, and nutritionists to understand how HarvXtra is working on the farm. In recent conversations with HarvXtra growers, we have gained insight into their experiences with and feedback on this new technology.

HarvXtra alfalfa grows just like other alfalfa varieties. Feedback from alfalfa growers and dairymen who planted and harvested this new alfalfa for the first time has been mostly positive. The agronomic concerns about plant establishment, growth under stress, lodging tolerance, and yield potential have been alleviated. Most growers say that HarvXtra alfalfa is meeting expectations for agronomic performance and yield potential. To date, there have only been isolated establishment issues, but no more than with other alfalfa varieties. One grower commented that his variety with a heavy seed coat clumped up in his drill, resulting in a lower-than-expected seeding rate. Most have had good establishment success and excellent weed control by taking advantage of early season weed control with glyphosate (Roundup®) herbicides.

HarvXtra is changing how growers think about harvest timing. Because HarvXtra technology has lower lignin content, no matter what stage of maturity, growers have been experimenting with harvest management practices to take advantage of the enhanced forage quality window. Most growers do not have all their alfalfa acres planted to alfalfa with HarvXtra. Thus, much of their HarvXtra alfalfa forage ends up in the same silos or bunkers as their conventional alfalfa silage. No true comparisons can be made in this scenario. One strategy on farms with partial HarvXtra alfalfa acres is to leave those acres as the last to be harvested so forage from these fields is similar in quality to earlier harvested fields.

Many first-time HarvXtra alfalfa growers are being very intentional about how they manage harvest timing. Some are delaying harvest to reduce cuttings on their farms. Others are seeing how high the forage quality is that they can deliver to their cows. The more curious growers keep HarvXtra alfalfa forage separate and are testing forage samples to understand the potential forage quality benefit with this technology. As you might expect, the results are variable. Some report very high RFQ values, even in situations where they do not expect them. Others have reported seeing no difference in RFQ between their standard alfalfa and HarvXtra alfalfa forage.

Manage your HarvXtra alfalfa comparison expectations. How can two growers have such different results when comparing HarvXtra alfalfa to their standard alfalfa? The answer is two words, biological variability. Forage quality is challenging to measure accurately with 1-2 samples. Most controlled scientific studies have at least four replications at 2-4 locations with 6-10 or more harvest events. This frequency of sampling helps deal with high variability associated with sampling and with the analysis of fiber and fiber digestibility. As more and more growers test HarvXtra alfalfa forage, the quality story will become more evident at the farm level.

For now, the best advice is to stay the course. If you are questioning the quality advantage of HarvXtra alfalfa in your operation based on a handful of field samples, you may be missing the true story due to the statistics of sampling frequency. The more samples and comparisons you can collect between HarvXtra and standard alfalfa varieties grown in the same field at the same time, the more you will learn about HarvXtra as compared to your standard alfalfa varieties. Despite sample variability, your cows will likely have a voice in helping you decide if reduced lignin technology is working.

Dos and don’ts for comparing HarvXtra alfalfa varieties on your farm. Do plant both HarvXtra and your standard alfalfa variety in the same field at the same seeding rate. Do manage weeds early. Do sample or harvest both varieties on the same day. Do sample from multiple locations in a field or take multiple samples from each wagon or truck of chopped silage. Do sample multiple cuttings.

Don’t compare alfalfa from different fields. Don’t compare alfalfa planted in different years. Don’t collect a single sample from each area and expect to find differences. Don’t expect to see a difference at every sampling point or cutting date. Don’t sample from a silo for comparison data since many things have impacted the sample by that point in time and variability is greater.

The future of managing quality and harvesting alfalfa is changing with HarvXtra technology. Join the conversation and let’s learn together how best to use this new technology to reduce risk, increase alfalfa forage quality and yield, and gain flexibility in our operations.