

# FORAGER



*Agronomics with livestock in mind!*



## IN THE FIELD – Planting Alfalfa

A wet spring has extended the planting window for alfalfa. Cool moist weather has covered most of the northeast for late April and early May. Most years the northeast is getting hot and dry by mid-May. These typical conditions are not conducive for establishing new alfalfa stands, especially the dryness. It is generally these conditions that limit spring planting time for alfalfa, not the calendar date.

In warmer soils of late spring, alfalfa will germinate and emerge quickly, enabling it to better compete with weeds. With the current weather conditions and the forecasts for the next few weeks, farmers should not be afraid to sow more stands this spring.

## IS IT TIME TO SWITCH TO AN EARLIER HYBRID?

*By Mark Aspelt, Mycogen Agronomist*

As rain is delaying corn planting, the question will inevitably come up- “Should I be switching to an earlier maturing corn hybrid?” The simple answer is not to worry about it until the end of May.

Most seed companies measure the maturity of hybrids based on the number of Growing Degree Units (GDU’s) from planting to physiological maturity (black layer). This number is based on a “normal” planting date. As planting is delayed beyond the “normal” date, the amount of GDU’s to maturity actually decreases. Research from Indiana and Ohio indicates that physiological maturity decreases by about 6.5 GDU’s for every day beyond May 1. What this means is that switching to an earlier maturing hybrid may not be necessary. Grain moisture for the full season hybrids will be wetter at harvest as planting is delayed, but the yield advantage usually covers this cost.

In Northern areas, where a full season hybrid is >100 days (i.e. northern Michigan), it is not economical to switch to an earlier hybrid until about the 20<sup>th</sup> of May. For the central Corn Belt with relative maturity ranges from 103 to 110 days, it is not economical to switch to an earlier hybrid until about May 25<sup>th</sup>. In areas where a full season hybrid is >110 day relative maturity, growers can wait until about the first week of June before switching.

## TO HARVEST OR TO PLANT?



Here we are again--grasses and alfalfa are ready to cut and corn is not planted yet. What do you do? In a

perfect world the obvious answer is both, as soon as possible. On most farms though, this is not possibility. Which to do first depends on how long each takes, what field conditions are, and how mature the forages are.

Delays in corn planting till early June may result in up to 15 to 20% lower yields than corn planted in early May (Penn State Agronomy Guide 2002, 2001 Cornell Guide for Integrated Field Crop Management). However, in years later planted corn may catch up and the lower yields are avoided, especially with silage. Delaying the harvest of forage crops can significantly decrease forage quality, resulting in increased feed supplement costs of \$0.56/cow/day to make up for this lower quality (Donna M. Amaral, University of Kentucky). On 100 cows and assuming this forage is fed 1/3 of a year, the additional feed costs would be \$6813. This number does not take into account any lost production due to the lower feed quality. On the planting side, if you expect to grow 1100 tons of corn silage and need to supplement 20% due to lost yields if late planted corn did not catch up, at \$25/ton it would cost \$5500. Just taking these numbers into account it is more beneficial to harvest first and then plant.

In most situations doing first cutting is the more cost effective and productive process. It is known that forages will decrease in quality if not harvested prior to head emergence, whereas decreased corn yields because of late planting are dependent on the growing conditions throughout the year. There are a number of variables to consider, such as the forage already being mature (quality is lost so plant corn), so each farm needs to evaluate conditions for themselves and make the right choice for their operation.