



# 5 Alfalfa factors to manage

Get closer to making the type of alfalfa you need in various rations by keeping these factors in mind.

**1 Seed Type and Dormancy.** Choose the right seed type and dormancy not only for the type of alfalfa you need (milk cow versus dry cow) but also for your soil and environmental conditions of your fields.

**2 Irrigation Schedule.** If irrigation is part of your management, size fields appropriately so you can irrigate the entire field in hours and not days. This will ensure the entire field has homogeneous maturity. Consider your water availability options now and in the future. Drip irrigation is a conservation practice that funding is available in most states. This management practice has direct benefits to the grower.

**3 Time at Harvest.** Calendar date is a very poor predictor of alfalfa hay quality at harvest. Use a Predictive Equations for Alfalfa Quality (PEAQ) stick to estimate alfalfa quality within 15 to 20 points of relative feed value (RFV) or 2 points of ADF. If your goal is to feed a 180 RFV alfalfa, you will have to cut it at 200 RFV in order to account for a 20-point loss between cutting and confection.

**4 Nutrient Loss.** It is estimated we lose 20 to 40 points of RFV between cutting and harvesting. This loss occurs mostly from the plant continuing to breathe after it is cut and consuming its most digestible nutrients as it does so. Exposing the entire plant to ultraviolet light helps “fix” nutrients inside the plant because the plant stops breathing faster after being exposed to the sun. Laying the plant flat and minimizing or not combining rows can have tremendous positive effects as far as locking in highly digestible and valuable nutrients in the plant after harvest.

**5 Dirt Contamination.** The normal ash content of alfalfa is around 8% to 10%. This is basically the addition of all minerals normally taken up by the plant (calcium, potassium, etc.). Anything above that is considered excessive dirt contamination. Minimize dirt contamination by:

- > **A** Setting the header height to minimize picking up dirt (>2" height).
- > **B** Use flat knives.
- > **C** Reduce furrow height.
- > **D** Harvest level fields.

Source: Enrique Schcolnik

