TRIAL UPDATE: WHY CONSIDER ITALIAN RYEGRASS – GREEN SPIRIT – AS A CROP IN YOUR ROTATION

By Dieter Härle, Nutrition-Agronomy Consultant, Best Options, Inc.

(In March of this year, Dieter Härle of Best Options, Inc., shared an article entitled, *"Why Consider Italian Ryegrass – Green Spirit – As a Crop in Your Rotation."* The following provides an update of this particular topic.)

While the tonnage totals are not complete, this growing season, like all the ones before and those to come, was a challenge to producers and demonstrates how "averages" really are only guidelines to measure real productivity and efficiency. Every year, the Midwest provides a wide variety of weather, from drought to too much moisture. This year's lower than normal seasonal temperatures were no different.

Italian Ryegrass has again shown great promise with a wide range of yields. Early seeding (drilling) and plenty of liquid manure proved valuable, but shortcomings could be observed when rains fell short. In addition, the crop seemed to be stressed when needed fertility could not be addressed with liquid manure alone. Currently, overall dairy economics are under stress, limiting out of pocket expenses for purchasing fertilizer. Imbalances were easy to observe not only in grasses or mixtures, but also in various straight side-by-side alfalfa stands.

As the spring unfolded, serious alfalfa winter kill was observed in some areas. Certain producers in those areas over-seeded with up to 10/lbs/acre of Italian Ryegrass with great success. Aggressive competition from the ryegrass filled out all the blank spots quickly and feed quality, in terms of RFQ, improved with each crop. This proved especially rewarding in areas with irrigation. The only concern appeared to be that while the grass appears to "milk" or feed from the alfalfa, in some cases the natural full color "bloom" of the ryegrass indicated a shortage of nitrogen and possibly other key elements including sulfur. The take-home message from this experience is that 40 lbs of Ammonium Sulfate N per acre very early in the season pays! (Liquid manure is just not a complete plant food!)

On the "*perennial grass* as forage" side great strides have been made with Soft Leaf Tall Fescue blends (Barenbrug STF-43). Seeded (drilled) at 20 lbs/acre and combined with alfalfa at half that rate, the crop will be slower to develop but will continually get stronger.

Cattle respond positively to these grass forages which contain higher digestible fiber content vs. straight alfalfa. Stands of this type should not be left for winter longer than 6 inches to reduce matting and subsequent winter kill. We have seen these crops taken well into November with excellent RFQ's and tremendous tonnage as silages. (Remember to cut grass shorter with your chopper. It packs better and is less fluffy, resulting in more efficient packing in the bunker or bag.)

More health issues due to stress have been seen this year. Soil testing is recommended (not just N-P-K) in combination with tissue testing prior to harvest. Some clients have seen extremely good success with foliar feeding programs, resulting in increases in tonnage, more efficient stress tolerance and moisture use, and most of all, increased forage quality. It is hoped that this data will be summarized and available by the World Dairy Expo in Madison.

One question that keeps coming up is - what will happen to yields when grass is added to forage programs? This answer is best supported by producer Dave Storms and his crew in Ridgeland County, Wisconsin. "While growing alfalfa on non irrigated land, we had a difficult time getting much over 5 tons of dry matter in 4 to sometimes even 5 cuttings per year! Since we began raising combinations of grass mixes including orchard grass, fescue and ryegrasses (annual and perennial), we are always over 7 tons of dry matter per year and have reached 9 tons dry matter without irrigation." Storm does most of his forage harvesting in the form of bale wrapping, at about 55% moisture. His production records are very impressive. He markets his hay mostly out of state, sometimes as far as Kentucky and Canada.

Some new developments include seed coating – Yellow Jacket. Attempting to mix seeds such as alfalfa and grass can be challenging because of the different seed sizes and weights. Encapsulating both the alfalfa and the grass seed ("Yellow Jacket" by Barenbrug USA) provides equal sizing of seeds, minimizes separation, and aids in establishment. Various combinations of E^2 (energy squared) hybrid alfalfa and Soft Leaf Tall Fescue Orchardgrass are available.

At the World Dairy Expo in Madison, Craig Fietzer, a Manawa, WI, producer, will be featured during a Virtual Farm Tour. Craig will be discussing the struggles and successes he's experienced incorporating grasses into his forage program.

Recording and measuring the impacts of management changes at the farm level is a valuable exercise. A new tool to help in this effort is MilkLab, which provides database management of milk bulk tank results and correlates their statistical impact in relation to changes in SCC, percent butterfat, or milk protein. It is internet based and very reasonably priced at $19.99 per month. It can be reviewed at: http://www.aginfoman.com and then DairyPerformance.com.

So why not consider grass? When doing so, be sure to seed as early as possible in the spring. For perennials, August is an excellent time to establish a stand.

If you have any questions, please contact Dieter Härle at Dieter@BestOptionsInc.com or Doug Gunnink, Agronomy Consultant, at dgunnink@myclearwave.net.