

# 5 Tips for Managing Your Alfalfa Crop in Challenging Times

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**T**he temptation during times of rapidly changing milk prices is to remove crop inputs. This decision is too often influenced simply by these fluctuations. Alfalfa or corn silage plants do not know what the price of milk is!

Whether milk prices are rising or falling, plants still need proper nutrition, weed and insect control, and stand density. Our discussion below outlines five tools and ideas to consider when managing your forage crops during challenging times.

## 1. Use soil tests to the fullest.

Soil tests are an inventory of the nutrients stored in the soil on your farm. Local agronomists can help you determine where nutrients are limited or excessive in the field and, consequently, how to correct low-nutrient soil areas and cut back where fertility is adequate. Technologies, like grid soil testing and variable rate applications, are examples of methods to determine where to apply nutrients and where they will do the most good. Variable rate applications allow growers to reallocate resources, and ultimately, fine-tune where and how they are investing in a crop or field.

“Growers need to understand how their soil rates from a nutrient standpoint. The way to determine that is by soil testing for fertility levels,” says Matt Repinski, master agronomy advisor with WinField. “In other words, ‘know before you grow,’ so you can put out what the crop needs and not invest dollars in a way that won’t realize a return.”

It also pays to be mindful of manure management. “Where you have a high soil test, you probably shouldn’t be applying manure; where you have a low soil test, it would be wise to put your manure there,” says Repinski. “A good way to save on input costs is by managing the N, P, and K (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) in your manure.”

Be aware that manure nutrients are NOT balanced nutrition for your crops. For example, potassium needs for high-yielding alfalfa cannot be supplied by manure applications only.

## 2. Take tissue samples.

Taking a nutritional snapshot of plants during the season to see what nutrients may be missing and performing any necessary corrections can help target plant nutrition applications.

“In challenging economic times, it’s probably more important than ever to do tissue sampling to know exactly what you need to apply, versus taking a broadcast approach,” says Vince Michalski, area sales manager with WinField.

“It’s hard to manage if you don’t measure,” says Repinski. “If an alfalfa grower is looking at doing any foliar applications, tissue testing is important. The cost of a tissue sample is minute compared to product costs, time, and running equipment across the field.”

## 3. Make technology work for you.

A number of companies offer satellite imagery capabilities, which help growers understand variations in yield potential within specific fields.

Satellite imagery — the R7® Tool by WinField is one example — can help you make data-driven agronomic decisions to maximize production potential across your operation. Be sure to work with a professional who knows the technology and can help you leverage it to its fullest. Technology can help you make forward-thinking decisions that can positively influence your crop management for seasons to come.

## 4. Don’t skimp on seed technologies or crop inputs.

Roundup Ready® alfalfa, as an example, is a very good investment for controlling weeds and getting a highly productive stand quickly. Fast alfalfa establishment is key to profitable alfalfa production.

Inputs to help manage insects (especially potato leafhopper) and diseases are very important. Fungicides are a new addition to many growers’ portfolios and are absolutely essential for high-yielding, high-quality alfalfa.

## 5. Work with a trusted crop advisor.

Realizing success with these tips hinges on working with someone who is knowledgeable and familiar with your acres. That person can help ensure the accuracy of soil and tissue testing, tell you if a fungicide is needed, monitor leafhopper population, and be attuned to your optimal cutting schedule.

“An insect outbreak in alfalfa can severely compromise the stand — sometimes within a week,” says Michalski. “If you don’t have someone on the ground and miss the window to get that pest under control, you’re backpedaling fast.”

Bottom line: In good times and bad times, forage growers need to be good managers. Rapidly changing milk prices make it tempting to manage inputs around the checkbook or an emotional reaction to price. Using the five tips outlined here can help you achieve a systems approach to crop management.

**Table 1.** Plant tissue nutrient requirements for alfalfa compared to corn

	Alfalfa	Corn
Nitrogen (N)	3.31%	2.61%
Phosphorus (P)	0.40%	0.33%
Potassium (K)	2.49%	2.01%
Calcium (Ca)	1.36%	0.51%
Magnesium (Mg)	0.40%	0.27%
Sulfur (S)	0.31%	0.20%
Boron (B)	39 ppm	11 ppm
Zinc (Zn)	29 ppm	25 ppm
Copper (Cu)	8.9 ppm	8.0 ppm
Manganese (Mn)	42 ppm	51 ppm

Source: University of Wisconsin - John Peters 2007. These are the ideal nutrient levels needed to maximize alfalfa growth, high quality, and high yield. Ideal nutrient levels for each crop are different. Meeting crop needs may require fine-tuning nutrient applications for each crop. Payoff is additional high quality, “nutrient dense” forage.