

## The role that Alfalfa plays in U.S. Agriculture

Ronald Cornish

(National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance, St. Paul, MN 55126, USA)

**Abstract:** Alfalfa also known as the “Queen of Forages” is the fourth most valuable crop in US behind Corn, Soybean & Wheat. While alfalfa is still the most widely used forage in the U.S. its acreage has declined by 23% over the last 10 years. The decline in newly planted alfalfa acres has slowed and in recent years reversed as a small increase in newly acres planted has been seen. Hay exports from the U.S. have grown rapidly form 2007 to 2013 nearly up 60% with alfalfa hay making up a large portion of this growth. In the U.S. alfalfa is competing with corn silage to find its place in the feed ration. The industry has seen significantly more corn silage being fed, but more recently we are beginning to see this trend reversing as the benefits of having a certain level of good alfalfa or alfalfa grass mixtures in the cow’s diet is being considered. Over the course of the last 10 years we continue to see advances in yield, persistence, and quality using both GMO and non-GMO approaches. The most recent advances have been around the improvement of digestibility and expanding the harvest window of alfalfa. This has been accomplished by the reduction of the accumulation of lignin in the stems and structural parts of the alfalfa plant. These types of technological advances improve alfalfa’s ability to remain a very important and competitive crop in the U.S. As other commodity prices have declined, alfalfa seed production is now being seen as a profitable alternative. New growers are entering into alfalfa seed production, which reverses a strong trend of growers exiting seed production over the last 10-15 years. As we make more advances in yield, quality, and stress tolerance alfalfa will remain to be known as the Queen of Forages.