Spring Cultivation of Established Alfalfa

Have you ever tried or been tempted to try tilling your alfalfa to improve production? What might be good or bad about this practice.

Some Great Plains alfalfa growers periodically cultivate their alfalfa stands, often using a spring-tooth harrow or disk or some specialized tillage equipment. Usually it is done to control weeds like mustards and downy brome, but sometimes light tillage is used to incorporate fertilizer, smooth rough spots, or lessen compaction. And some folks claim this tillage increases production by splitting crowns into two or more plants.

Are these claims true, or just old alfalfa grower’s tales? Well, tillage generally does stimulate early alfalfa growth by blackening the soil. But, most research shows that if spring tillage is aggressive enough to provide useful weed control, it also damages alfalfa stands and yields. Likewise, light tillage that does not harm stands also usually fails to control many weeds.

Apparently, you can’t have your cake and eat it, too.

There is a down side, though, to alfalfa tillage. By cutting open some of the crowns, diseases can enter and start injuring the plant. These crown and root diseases usually take a while to show much damage, so if the field will be rotated to another crop in a year or two, losses will be slight if any. But, if you want to keep that stand for a longer time, do not till or diseases might start to thin your stands earlier than normal.

Bottom line – spring tillage, as long as it occurs before alfalfa greens up and when soils are dry, does little harm to alfalfa. But it also does little good. So you decide if it’s worth it to you.

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