

Research Investment in "Other" Forage Legumes

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Legumes are unique among forages in that they generally have two major advantages compared to grasses: 1) they can fix significant amounts of atmospheric N, thereby precluding the need for fossil-fuel-energy consuming synthetic N fertilizers, and 2) they allow more efficient animal production through grazing or conserved feeding. Alfalfa is unique among the forage legumes in having a good record of public and commercial funding for research, development of new cultivars, and marketing. The financial and personnel support for research and development of legume species has eroded significantly. The common "other" forage legume species utilized in pastures or hay fields have likely been introduced from a non-local source and can be considered non-natives. Climate, pests and diseases, management, persistence, and socio-economic and political vagaries impact the use and availability of these species. Some attributes that make "other" legumes desirable in their intended agricultural practices have been construed to be undesirable by non-agricultural interests. In some locales these otherwise valuable species have earned the monikers of "weed", "invasive", or "pest" for one or more of their traits. The need for high quality and sustainable forage production for economical supply of dairy, meat, and animal products has never been greater. Yet, no one commodity group or organization, commercial or public, has taken the lead to promote the financial support for the "other" legumes mostly because their economic and social value is hidden within systems that lead to marketed animal products. We argue that greater support of research in the "other" forage legumes is essential for animal production agriculture to reduce the risks associated with ever-changing economic and environmental stresses.