



Farm Views

Producer Question — Should I Aerate my Pasture?

Tom Dorn
Extension Educator

I received this call from a Lancaster County stockman and hay producer some time back. I thought it might be a good topic to present in THE NEBLINE but waited until now so it would be more timely in terms of planning actions one might take.

After visiting with the producer, I called Extension Forage Specialist, Bruce Anderson. He had this to say about aerating pastures and haylands. "Some grasses, especially brome, can get root-bound a.k.a. sod-bound which decreases the ability of water to penetrate into the soil. This generally happens under conditions where the pasture has been heavily pastured or continuously mowed for hay and where the soil is compacted and where the pasture has been under fertilized."

The caller also said that his neighbor aerated one pasture and fertilized another pasture in the spring of 2000 and felt that he benefitted more from aeration than fertilization. Dr. Anderson and I discussed this as well. Remembering that we had a very dry spring in 2000, this may have indeed been the case. Basically, water, not fertility could have been the limiting

factor in 2000. According to Anderson, "The improvement in water penetration in the aerated pasture may have had a bigger benefit than fertilization on the other pasture, given the conditions that existed in 2000."

Additionally, if the nitrogen source was urea or if it contained urea (either dry 46-0-0 or 28 percent UAN liquid) and if it was applied at a time when no rain fell for a couple of weeks or more, nitrogen volatilization loss from surface applied urea may have been quite large, further reducing the benefit of fertilization.

The conclusion ... aeration can be of benefit on grass pastures (especially brome) under certain conditions.

Dr. Anderson recommended one use a disk that is set so that it is cutting but not turning over the soil. If it is set to cut three inches deep and leave a slot about one-half inch wide, a disk will do a good job of aerating a sod while causing the least amount of damage.

The benefits of aerating a sod are increased water and air penetration into the soil. The downside to aeration is the expense for the disking operation and risk of increased weed growth in the disturbed soil. The best time to aerate a sod, according to Anderson, is late March to early April. (TD)

Biosolids Improves Soil and Cuts Production Costs



Extension Technologist Dave Smith takes GPS readings on a field participating in Lancaster's Biosolids Management Program.

Now that harvest activities are over, are you thinking about ways to improve production and cut production costs? You can reduce your out-of-pocket fertilizer costs, improve poor soil and increase yields by using municipal biosolids. This material is high in organic matter and contains all the nutrients that are needed by crops to grow. Most cooperators see a yield benefit for three to four cropping years after an application.

To defray the cost of application, the city of Lincoln is paying up to \$.65 per cubic yard for application. If you don't have spreading equipment, you can rent a spreader from the city for a very reasonable cost.

Cooperators must have a loader and be able to apply the materials in a timely way. If cooperators are interested, they should sign up for biosolids before Jan. 15, 2002. They will be eligible for biosolids after soil tests are taken in the spring of 2002 and their field has been approved for application.

Interested in biosolids, but want to know more? An education program is being planned in February to explain how biosolids improve fertility and increase yields. Contact Barb Ogg or Dave Smith at 441-7180 for details. (BPO)

Management Pays Better than Labor

Tom Dorn
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Late fall and early spring is the time of year when agricultural producers look ahead. They spend time considering how to make the best use of the time, labor and equipment at their disposal. They develop balance sheets, cash flows, crop budgets and make arrangements for financing. Top managers also allocate time to attend educational programs to learn new skills, hone their old ones and to keep abreast of new developments.

In my opinion, the time spent on these activities is the most valuable time a producer spends all year. One should give this part of the job a high priority. It shouldn't be relegated to late night hours or only when weather or other circumstances make it impossible to do other things.

If one has any doubt whether quality management time is important, they should look at the way large corporations are structured. At the very top of the corporate ladder is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The main job of the CEO is to know where the company has a competitive edge and to research new endeavors the company should undertake in the future. Sometimes, the CEO must identify what isn't working and discontinue the money losers.

Below the CEO in the corporate structure, one finds a layer of middle managers. It is the middle managers, not the CEO, that oversee the day to day operation of the company. Under middle management, are the people involved in actual production. In all cases, the laborers, as important as they are, are at the very end of the chain of command and at the bottom of the pay scale as well.

Every organization must strike a balance between labor and management. Too many managers without an adequate labor force will topple a company. On the other hand, a company with a large labor force but inadequate management and planning, is just as doomed to failure.

Agriculture is somewhat unique in the business world. Instead of dividing the various levels of management over many individuals, one or a very few individuals' time often must be divided over the various levels of management. Someone in the farm operation must serve as CEO looking for opportunities to capitalize on any competitive edge that their human resources, geographical location or capital assets might provide. Most times, these same people must simultaneously serve as middle



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management. In this capacity, they do the job of the vice presidents in charge of: finance, promotion, personnel, production and marketing. Finally, the farmer, family members and hired labor must also be highly skilled and efficient producers of the products that ultimately support the farm and provide a family living.

Farmers are hard working and industrious people. However, I have noticed in my 20 plus years in extension that many farmers tend to spend far too much time performing the low paying production jobs and

far too little of their time on the high paying management jobs. Of course, there are exceptions to this generalization. I remember a successful and respected farmer who was fond of repeating something that his father would tell him when he was a young man, "Plan your work. Then work your plan."

If you recognize that you may be a little short on time spent in management but can't think of any high level jobs to tackle, the following year-end list can get you started:

If you are raising crops, calculate the average cost of production per acre and per bushel. Then analyze the results. Did the average price received more than cover the cost of production and provide profit to cover family living expense? If not, can you identify which fields are most profitable and which were not profitable?

If you are raising livestock, do you know your five-year average death loss percentage, rate of gain and feed conversion ratio? Are these in line with similar farm operations? What is your cost of production per head or per pound?

Do you manage risk by forward pricing when there are opportunities to lock in a profitable price?

Knowing your profit centers is essential. The long term success of any business depends

on being able to expand profitable ventures and eliminate perpetually unprofitable ones. Can you calculate the profitability of individual fields that you farm or livestock enterprises that you have? If you have identified which fields, crops or livestock operations were not profitable this year, do you know "what went wrong?" Have you identified what you can do to make the unprofitable enterprises more profitable in the coming year?

If you can't answer the questions raised above, perhaps you might consider improving your record keeping skills. Extension has been offering a well-received computerized financial record keeping workshop series for a number of years. This series will be offered again this spring in selected locations. Watch THE NEBLINE for the workshop announcements. Alternatively, (or concurrently) have you considered joining the Nebraska Farm Business Association (NFBA)? The NFBA can help you keep records and will analyze them and show you how your farm compares to similar operations. Call the extension office for more information.

Lastly, have you set goals for your operation? Are you planning to bring partners or family members into the operation in the next few years? How big (or small) do you want to be in five years? What enterprises would you like to get into or phase out of? Have you anticipated which pieces of equipment will need to be overhauled or replaced in the next year or two? Have you prioritized the repair/replacement list and factored these costs into your cash flow plan?

Looking at a longer time frame: Do you anticipate that urban growth will be taking some of your farm land? How is that going to affect the way you farm or even whether you can continue to farm? When do you want to retire and how will you finance your retirement? The list could go on indefinitely.

If your operation isn't paying you as well as you would like, maybe you should give yourself a promotion and spend more time in management. Remember, management always pays better than labor.