

# OVERVIEW OF ALFALFA PRODUCTION IN THE COLORADO RIVER REGION OF ARIZONA

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## ABSTRACT

Alfalfa producers in the Colorado River region of Arizona have experienced some shifting trends in markets as well as production over the past few years. Alfalfa hay prices have been depressed for a year and a half, although they show signs of strengthening at the end of 1992. Alfalfa acreage has increased significantly over the past 10 years in the northern counties of La Paz and Mohave, while acreage in Yuma county is considerably lower than 10 years ago. Growers in some areas have applied more emphasis on lightweight retail bales responding to less demand from other markets. Unstable markets and new challenges such as whitefly control could compel producers to change production practices to remain competitive.

Key Words: Alfalfa hay markets, alfalfa outlook, whitefly in alfalfa.

## INTRODUCTION

The past two years have been an arduous time for many alfalfa growers in Arizona including those in the Colorado River region. Depressed demand and lower prices have been the norm over that period. The Colorado River region consists of production areas in Yuma, La Paz, and Mohave counties. Average alfalfa hay prices from 1990 to 1991 dipped 25%, 22%, 28% for Yuma, La Paz, and Mohave counties respectively. From 1991 through October of 1992, average prices dipped again 8%, 12%, 6% respectively (figure 1 & 2). Alfalfa hay stocks have increased over the period as growers hold out for better prices. Growers in Yuma county have experienced problems with whitefly for a couple of years, and La Paz and Mohave counties gained that experience in the 1992 season.

## MARKET TRENDS

Market prices began dropping in the early summer of 1991, and have remained unstable throughout 1992. Alfalfa acreage between 1990 and 1991 increased as growers looked favorably on good markets and anticipated increasing demand due to reduced yield and acreage in portions of central and northern California as drought conditions continued (figure 3). Many parts of California received more favorable weather conditions in the early spring of 1991. Although the more favorable weather did not "end" drought conditions, irrigation water deliveries were not as low as had been predicted, and alfalfa production did not fall as anticipated.

A drop in milk production and depressed milk prices reduced demand from the industry that had traditionally purchased large quantities of hay from the Colorado River region. In addition, dairies in central Arizona over the past few years had begun utilizing more local green-chop hay. The combination of increased acreage, reduced demand, and more favorable weather conditions in California meant that supply outpaced demand considerably and prices fell.

Growers, especially in Yuma and Mohave counties, began putting more emphasis on retail markets to sell their hay. Generally, growers will take clippings in late fall and winter, but in the winter of 1991-92, large numbers of sheep were brought into the region as growers looked for alternatives. Sheep grazing is not new to the region, but growers who did not traditionally sheep off their fields, did so in record numbers. Some, after the market woes of 1991, simply plowed up old stands and did not replace them. Others kept thinning stands another year instead of replanting or rejuvenating them. That trend continues at the end of 1992, although the market shows signs of strengthening. Huge stocks which had accumulated throughout portions of 1991 and 1992 have been reduced slightly.

#### WHITEFLY: A NEW CONSIDERATION

Whitefly in alfalfa has become a problem throughout the southwest. In 1992, alfalfa growers in La Paz and Mohave counties experienced severe whitefly problems for the first time. Yuma county growers have seen increasing problems for the past couple of years. One Yuma county experiment showed a 10-20% yield reduction in non-treated check plots (unpublished data). In addition to reduced yield, honeydew from whitefly feeding can cause severe reductions in hay quality. To combat the whitefly, growers in this region tried various strategies. Some treated fields with pesticides, others discontinued irrigation delivery throughout late summer when infestations were highest, and some growers tried shortened harvest cycles. None of the strategies proved entirely successful. Whitefly infestations also delayed fall plantings as large populations made it difficult to establish a stand. Growers are interested to see how the whitefly populations will develop next season, but there is little doubt that this pest will change many alfalfa production practices in this region.

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Figure 1.

### MONTHLY AVG HAY PRICES LA PAZ COUNTY ARIZONA

- 1990      - - - 1991      ····· 1992

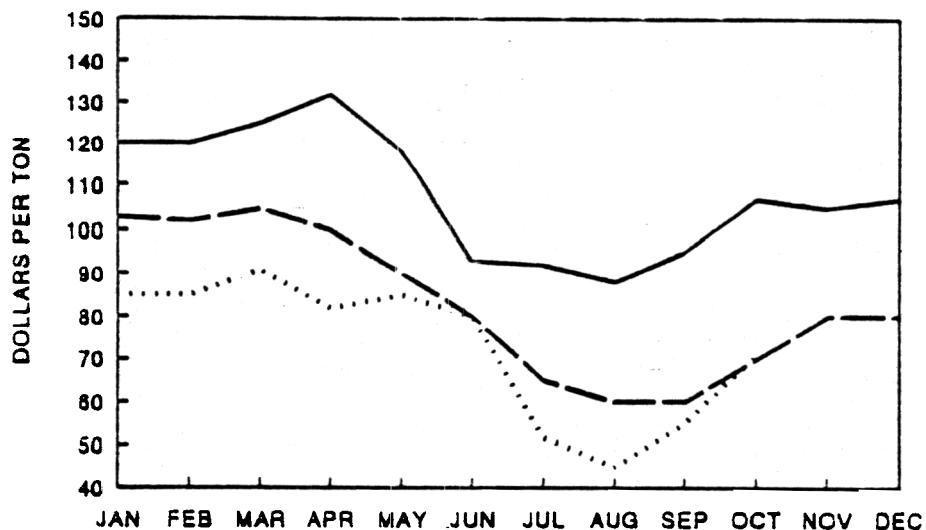


Figure 2.

### MONTHLY AVG ALFALFA HAY PRICE YUMA COUNTY ARIZONA

— 1990      - - - 1991      ····· 1992

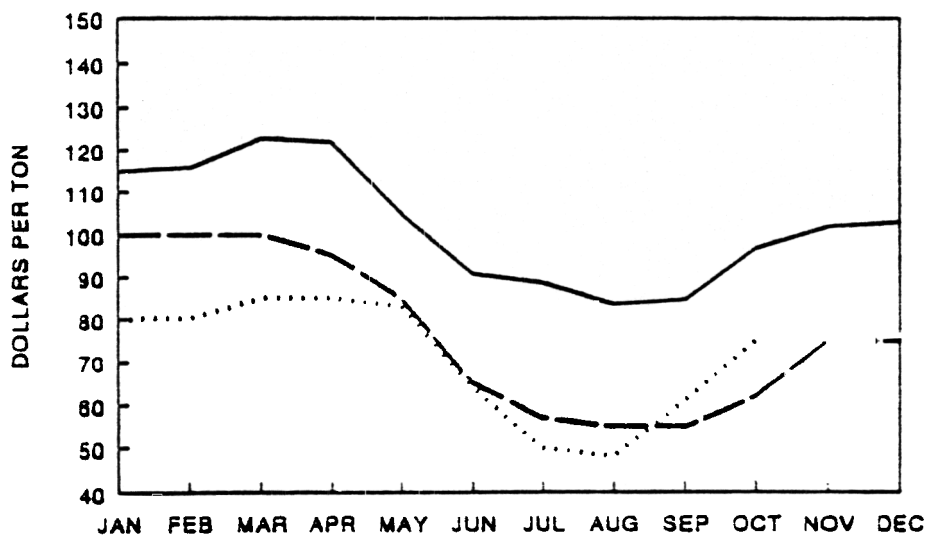


Figure 3.

### ALFALFA ACREAGE

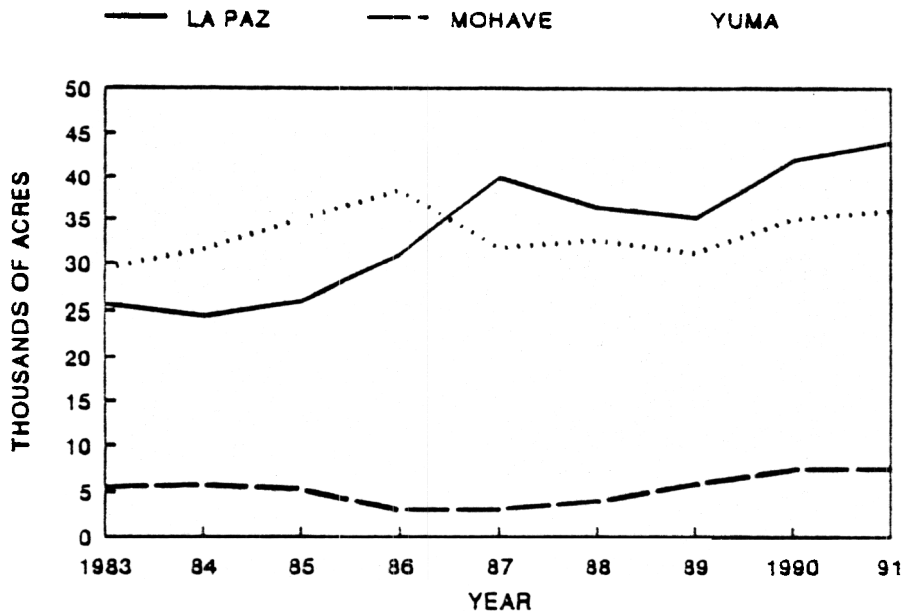


Figure 4.

### YEARLY ALFALFA PRODUCTION

