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NETAFIM DRIP IRRIGATION SUCCESS STORY

CROP ROTATION

CROP ROTATION WITH DRIP IRRIGATION INCREASES YIELDS

As Francisco Parra talks about farming, it's hard to believe he's just a few years out of college. The Central Valley native and graduate of Fresno State is obviously no stranger to production agriculture, and, moreover, his familiarity with the Central Valley's Westside is impressive. As he combs the fields of Burford Ranch in his white Ford F150, he speaks with an innate level of enthusiasm for farming, especially for his experience with drip irrigation.

"Heavy cuts, heavy, heavy cuts," says Parra with a wide grin, referring to harvesting an alfalfa field irrigated with drip tape. "It just makes sense with drip."

Parra, an agronomist and PCA with Burford, was at first impressed with drip irrigation's ability to control disease, pests and weeds - but was stunned when he saw the yield returns.

"Whether we're growing [processing] tomatoes, corn, wheat, watermelons, grapes or alfalfa, you just can't beat the yields," says Parra. "When you're pushing 25 to 30 percent more crop per acre versus the other ways of irrigating, you can't ignore those kinds of results."

Aside from yields, Parra enjoys the flexibility that drip irrigation offers specifically with crop rotation. With row crops, Parra knows that changes in market conditions drive changes in planting habits.

"Some years the [processing] tomatoes are a lucrative market, so you have to be ready to adjust, but you also need to be ready to plant another crop for a variety of reasons," notes Parra, citing how alfalfa has experienced good pricing lately. "With standard spacing and the system already in place, you just break up the soil about nine inches deep and you're ready for the next planting."

Additionally, Parra touts that drip offers much better germination control, though on some sandy soils the use of a sprinkler system is still necessary to get a crop established. One thing to consider, he says, is whether you're starting with transplants or seeds - sandier soils just can't hold the necessary water to get a crop started.

"But even with the additional cost of the sprinklers for germination with certain crops, there are still profits at the end of the day," says Parra. "Alfalfa for instance - with drip we get two more cuttings off the field - it's easy to see how that translates to financial gains."

CROP ROTATION

Parra goes on to explain that most of their drip systems are upwards of five years old, so the initial investment to install the drip irrigation system(s) has long paid for itself. According to Parra, the initial capital investment is something that producers are becoming more comfortable with - especially throughout the Westside where current drought conditions have left thousands of acres fallowed due to lack of water.

“With drip it’s not only less water, but more importantly it’s more efficient water,” says Parra. “We all have to do something, because the water just isn’t there and this is our livelihood.”

Though yield increases, ability to control disease and many factors make drip an enticing option for irrigation, Parra says that just like with the rest of farming practices, there are tradeoffs. Emitter clogging, rodent damage and root intrusion are all factors to consider with a drip system.

“From crop to crop, you’re bound to have issues come up with the drip system - but it’s no different than with other things in farming,” says Parra. “Equipment breaks, repairs are needed every so often - but that’s just farming - you’ve got to manage those kinds of expectations.”

Even with the potential for needed repairs from time to time, Parra maintains that drip is the future of irrigating - citing his positive experience growing garlic last year on thinwall drip tape and his willingness to try drip on other crops.

“If we can get the yields and rotate the crops for effective management, we are all for trying new crops,” says Parra. “You just have to have an open mind and be willing to adjustments to maximize the use of the drip tape.”

Parra goes on to say that whatever the crop, the overall management is just easier with drip especially with less need for irrigators during busy seasons. Large fields are easily watered with just the flip of a few switches, with no need to hassle with flood valves and/or moving sprinkler equipment.

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