

NETAFIM DRIP IRRIGATION SUCCESS STORY

ALFALFA

RUSSELL SCHAFER



DRIP PUTS THE GROWER IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

When Russell Schafer was hired at Wegis & Young in Buttonwillow, California, his job was to drive innovation throughout the conglomerate's farming operation. As the 31-year-old began to explore the various areas of the business where the largest efficiencies could be gained, one of the most obvious answers was its irrigation systems. Soon, what started out as a 5-acre test plot of alfalfa on drip irrigation grew to more than 75 acres - and according to Schafer, it's just the beginning. By next year, Wegis & Young plans to have 300 acres of alfalfa on drip irrigation.

"We're really in the early stages of understanding drip and the way it can benefit our operations," says Schafer. "But if the results continue the way they have, then this is definitely the way forward." Schafer, who returned to farming after a stint selling insurance, grew up around agriculture and believes that his generation of farmers will be the ones to drive change in typical growing practices, including how they can increase efficiencies.

"Everyone is putting an emphasis on water efficiency, and that's definitely important," says Schafer. "But I'm most excited about the instantaneous control of drip irrigation. It really puts the farmer in the driver seat." Schafer notes that while drip can be viewed as a way to be more efficient with water, drip is really the starting point for making a more efficient farming operation. With shorter wait times for water to reach plants, less labor with managing ditches and the continued implementation of automation, farmers can do more with less water and less of other resources.

"Automation in drip allows for such precision," says Schafer. "Even looking at a zone of water that you ran for five and a half hours versus six and a half hours, you can literally see the change in uniformity and adjust accordingly - it's amazing stuff." Schafer points out that the increased efficiencies gained with drip irrigation also allow him to better manage expectations with his customers. Wegis & Young grows alfalfa for several surrounding dairies, and with drip irrigation, timing can be better managed to coincide with chopping and delivery schedules. "We can be irrigating up to three days before

harvest when using drip irrigation in alfalfa," says Schafer. "That's just unheard of when you're flooding."

Schafer says that he is constantly learning more about drip irrigation and how it can be applied to other crops and soil types throughout Wegis & Young's operation - expressing an entrepreneurial feeling about America's oldest profession. One of the areas where Schafer has noticed big savings is land leveling. "Before with flood irrigation, your fields had to have a slope to them or else you couldn't get your water from one end to the other," says Schafer. "Now with drip, it's a minimal concern because you're forcing water through a dripline system that doesn't depend on gravity."

Schafer, who has his dripline on a 40-inch spacing setup, does utilize a surface sprinkler for initial crop germination. Also, given the makeup of the operation's sandy soil, he uses a pulse irrigating method of switching between irrigation zones for roughly six hours at a time for a period of 48 hours. The drip system is flushed once a month with a chlorine wash to ensure the driplines and emitters stay clean.

Regarding his experience as a Netafim customer, Schafer applauds the company's long-standing presence in Kern County and their team of irrigation experts. "In this area you really have to know your soils and understand how drip works in relation to them," says Schafer. "Netafim does a great job of understanding my operation's needs, and that's why I choose to work with them."