

News Column

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HARVESTING ALFALFA IN THE FALL

I just bought the most expensive alfalfa I have purchased in my lifetime,...and I feel good about it. While it may have seemed expensive, I have hay in the barn and I'm ready for winter.

I could have looked for cheaper hay, but that doesn't always make sense. Instead, I bought premium quality hay – stuff my sheep will actually eat – and it was delivered right to my barn. It was a good deal for both of us.

With good quality alfalfa selling for \$200 per ton and up (I paid more than \$200) it might be tempting to try to get one more cutting of alfalfa yet this year. While that isn't recommended, I can see why someone might do it.

To maximize yields next year, the recommended practice is to have at least 8 to 12 inches of growth on alfalfa at the time of a hard freeze. In Kansas, the average date of the first hard freeze in the fall is about October 15. If you were to cut hay now, the likelihood of getting eight more inches of growth before a freeze would be slim.

A killing freeze for alfalfa, by the way, is 26 degrees Fahrenheit. It doesn't actually kill it but it will stop growth.

It usually takes four to six weeks to achieve 8 to 12 inches of alfalfa growth in the fall. Therefore, harvesting alfalfa during the first two weeks of September is the normal target. Now that it is early October, it is better to wait for a freeze, then cut the hay and hope it will dry down so it can be baled.

If you're like me, you might be thinking a half ton of \$200 per ton hay could be worth the risk of a decreased hay crop next year. And, you're wondering how much production will be lost because of cutting at the wrong time, aren't you?

Yeah, I'm wondering the same thing,...and I've been digging for that answer off and on for a few years.

The best answer I can find is that you'll probably lose as much tonnage next year as you gain by taking the extra cutting this fall. I'm finding that answer in other news articles though and not really in a research publication, so take it for what its worth.

The math isn't quite as simple as it appears. It will actually be more expensive to harvest that half ton of hay this fall than it would be to harvest it with next year's crop because it requires an extra trip across the field with your swather and baler.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that the alfalfa left standing this fall would just be mixed in and harvested with the first cutting next year. What I'm saying is you will have increased production next summer by not harvesting at the wrong time in the fall and depleting carbohydrate root reserves.

I'm just a dust-on-the-dashboard or back-of-a-napkin economist though. I do a lot of math – sometimes even in my head – but I'm not really trained in economics. Nevertheless, I'm still confident it would be cheaper to harvest the same tonnage from four passes across the field than from five.

If you're short on hay, or if you think alfalfa will be cheaper next year than it is now, I won't criticize your decision to swath alfalfa this week. But I won't praise it either.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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