

News Column

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LATE ALFALFA CUTTING

Late season rains make it really tempting to harvest one more cutting of alfalfa in October, or even November some years, but that's usually a bad idea. For north-central and northeast Kansas the recommended cutoff date for the last cutting of alfalfa is late September. Not late October.

Why late September? We take the last cutting in September because alfalfa needs adequate root reserves going into the winter to carry it through dormancy and then re-grow in the spring. It takes four to six weeks for root reserves to replenish and there is about a 50% chance of a 24 degree freeze by November 7. Thus, the late September harvest cutoff.

Note that alfalfa can survive a frost and it takes colder temperatures to send it into dormancy for the winter. The temperature needs to drop to 24 to 26 degrees Fahrenheit to stop alfalfa growth in the fall.

Sure, you'll still have alfalfa growing the following spring even if you take a late cutting in the fall, but the stand may be thinner and it may be slower to green-up in the spring. Slower green-up and a thinner stand translates to less hay produced that year, and for the life of the stand.

For long-term stand viability we recommend harvesting the last cutting of alfalfa by late September in this part of the state. We want to allow four to six weeks for regrowth and want to have at least 12 inches of regrowth when alfalfa is hit by a killing freeze (24 to 26 degrees F).

I'm a bit of a gambler and when hay prices were high and feed supplies short I was guilty of telling producers to risk it and take one more cutting in mid-October if they didn't might losing some production the next year. I wouldn't harvest alfalfa in early November though, unless we had already had a hard freeze.

The worst thing that could happen would be to take a late October or early November cutting and then have alfalfa grow about three to six inches before being hit by a killing freeze. If that happened, carbohydrate reserves would be at their low point and stand thinning over the winter and slow green-up in the spring could be expected.

This late in the game, the best bet is to just wait for a freeze. After a freeze, then it is OK to swath and bale alfalfa without risk of damaging the stand. It may be hard to get the hay dried down and baled in November, but you won't damage the stand by cutting after a killing freeze.

The other option is to wait a little longer, then graze it. Don't get in a hurry to graze though. Alfalfa needs to be dead and brown before turning cattle or sheep out to graze. Otherwise, bloat could be a problem.

Experienced cattlemen – those who have lost a few over the years – know that the absolute worst time to graze growing alfalfa is the night it frosts. If you have a cow getting out on alfalfa, she may get along just fine until the morning after a frost. That's when you are likely to find her bloated tight as a tick with four feet aiming toward the sky.

Grazing alfalfa can be about as safe as feeding it though. Just be sure to wait until the alfalfa dead and dried down, and remember to fill the cows up before turning them out to graze.

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 gmcclore@ksu.edu.

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