

# When to make last cutting can be hard decision

In some areas of Kansas, alfalfa growth resumed somewhat in September after a long period of drought and low production during the summer. This may create a dilemma for producers, said Jim Shroyer, crop production specialist at Kansas State Research and Extension. "Would you make the last cutting of the season now or wait until just before the first killing freeze is forecast to get as much productivity as possible? The timing of the last cutting can have a long-lasting

impact on the productivity of the stand," he said. The agronomics of the question are clear, Shroyer said. "At this stage of the growing season, alfalfa plants need to store enough carbohydrates to survive the winter. If root reserves are not replenished adequately before the first killing freeze (24 to 26 degrees) in the fall, the stand is more susceptible to winter damage than it would be normally," he said. The last cutting before fall dor-

mancy should be timed so there are four to six weeks of growth time, or about eight to 12 inches of foliage, before the average killing freeze, allowing adequate time for replenishment of root reserves, Shroyer said. For northern areas of the state, particularly northwest, the September should be the target date for the last cutting before dormancy, he said. The last week of September should be the cutoff date for southwest Kansas. The first week of


October is the cutoff for southeast Kansas. Making one last cutting in mid-October would be for the plants to regrow about three to six inches and then get a killing frost. In that scenario, the root carbohydrate reserves would be at a low point. This could hamper greenup next spring," Shroyer said. After a killing freeze, the remaining forage (if any) can be hayed safely, he added. However, the producer should act quickly because

the leaves will soon drop off. Late fall is also a great time of the year to take a soil sample of alfalfa ground, Shroyer said. "This timing allows for an accurate assessment of available soil nutrients and provides enough time to make nutrient management decisions before the crop starts growing in the spring. Soil test of most interest include pH, phosphorus and potassium, and to a lesser extent sulfur and boron." When sampling for immobile

nutrients, he said, sampling depth should be six inches, while mobile nutrients (sulfur) should be sampled to 24 inches.

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