RAY AGRO & PETROLEUM LTD.

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Cut your forages a break, they need a rest too!

Looking backwards often gives us insight into how to move forward. The 2015 drought was stressful for all forage producers and many people either paid exorbitant prices for hay or drastically reduced their herds. Strangely, we had the opposite issue in 2016 when hay was more abundant; many producers found extra forage stockpiled in the spring of 2017. With abundant rain so far in 2017, this might be a great year to allow our grass and legume forage crops a good fall rest to recover from the stresses of the past two years.

Legumes such as alfalfa, are particularly sensitive to late fall cutting. If they are cut within 4-6 weeks of a good killing frost, they must utilize root reserves to regrow and are unable to replace them prior to winter, leaving them in a vulnerable, weakened position. The roots will be less winter hardy, more susceptible to root diseases and may succumb to cold weather and die.

Time your second cut to occur before August 15th.

This will give the plants time to regrow and replace their root reserves until a killing frost (-5C). After the frost the plants may be grazed without affecting the nutrients, but one must be aware of nitrate buildup and feed tests for nitrates would be recommended. While grazing may be an option, allowing this residue to return as cover on the soil will work to help drought proof the crop in the future as it builds a light thatch layer keeping moisture from evaporating.

Time your second cut to occur immediately before or after a killing frost.

While it may be difficult to dry the hay at this point in time, ensiling it will work. It is also possible to swath graze the alfalfa as long as it is swath grazed early in the season. Try to leave at least 6 inches of stubble however to ensure some snow gets trapped to protect the root crown from severe cold temperature.

Improving survival through fertilization.

Alfalfa is quite capable of fixing its own nitrogen, but requires large amounts of other nutrients. A weakened stand will benefit from an application of phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) if applied early enough in the season. P is needed to ensure good root development and promotes vigorous spring growth. K is needed to protect plant tissue from freezing, storing winter reserves, and improves disease resistance. If you are considering applying these nutrients apply it ASAP for the 2017 year. The benefits will not be as good as if it had been spring applied, but better to try to help than nothing at all. Soil sampling should be performed to provide some guidance in what nutrients are lacking and other soil parameters such as pH. Spring broadcast applications of P and K are more beneficial as it takes time for these two nutrients to work their way into the root zone for uptake. These nutrients do not move downward through the soil profile easily.

Give it a rest

Providing time for ample root recovery and growth is essential in having healthy long term stands of 5 to 7 years. A stressful fall once every 3 to 5 years will not affect the stand as much as a stressed crop every year or every second year.

Just remember to get that bounce back into your step after a long, harvest season you often need time to put your feet up on a sandy beach somewhere to rest and relax, so do your forages.

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