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The Effect of a Late Season Cutting of Cool Season Grasses

Drastically different conditions defined the summers of 2018 and 2019. What remains constant from fall to fall, however, is the way cool season grasses prepare for winter dormancy.

As temperatures drop in to the 70's, cool season grasses start growing again. As they do, photosynthesis via green plant leaves produces energy. Energy is first used to grow new leaves. When ample green leaf area has been produced, energy is transported to roots. Surplus root energy is stored to maintain the plant through the winter and initiate green-up when temperatures are right next spring. It's a simple, but often overlooked process that can result in drastic differences in future grass production if not managed correctly.

While 2018 heat and drought hurt many grass yields, our hot/dry period this summer came after most of our forage yield had been made. After that hot/dry period, ample moisture resulted in nice regrowth. It has even delayed haying in some cases.

What's all that mean for 2020 production? The summer of 2019 has allowed many cool season grass stands to 'gain a little ground' so we're not heading in to fall with such short forage supplies. With any luck, the better recovery period will result in higher tiller numbers next year. It still must be coupled with good management.

For fall grazing, maintain appropriate grazing heights of at least four to six inches. Harvesting below a four-inch height means the plant not only has to respond to the harvest of photosynthetic area, but may have to deplete root reserves to do so. If adequate time/rest aren't given to replenish reserves prior to winter dormancy, stands can be compromised.

To monitor forage growth, walk through the stand using a ruler or other measuring device to determine the average cool season grass height (don't measure foxtail and crabgrass heights). If below four inches, try to find an alternative. If regrowth has been good, grazing is okay with extreme caution to avoid removal of forage growth needed to help next year's stand.

If clipping for weed control, or if you are still trying to get hay up, keep mowing heights at four plus inches, staying above new growth when clipping if possible. This will keep too much forage from being removed and help facilitate a rapid recovery prior to dormancy.

Management now can help not only for 2020, but encourage good grass health in the future as well.

Tree Planting in the Fall

Spring is the preferred planting time for trees like beech, birch, redbud, magnolia, tulip poplar, willow/scarlet/black oak, willows, and dogwood. Fall is better for many others. Why?

Spring soils are cold and can be wet with low oxygen levels inhibiting root growth. Fall soils are warmer, often with good moisture for good root growth. Good fall root growth means trees become established months *before* spring-planted trees and can better withstand summer stresses.

The best time to plant? Early September to late October is early enough that roots can become established before ground freeze. The tops are dormant, but roots are actively growing, so make sure soils are moist (not soggy). If we experience warm spells in the winter, water again. Mulch is a good option to help minimize moisture loss while slowing soil cooling, allowing root growth to continue as long as possible.