K-STATE Research and Extension | Meadowlark District

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Approaching Forage Crop Dormancy?

By the time you read this, Northeast Kansas will be close to the date of our average first 32-degree temperatures. The chances of it happening? Low - but maybe that's good?

For alfalfa stands, the benefit of a longer growing season depends on where you are in the harvest cycle. Alfalfa stops growing at 26 degrees. To give it time to build carbohydrate reserves to survive winter, the recommendation for the last growing season cutting has always been to do so to allow for eight to 12 inches of foliage growth (four to six weeks) prior to the first killing frost. If you harvested later than mid-September, a longer season may be a good thing.

For brome stands recovering from fall armyworm feeding (or just about any forage experiencing heavy grazing or even haying late into the season), a longer growing season could also be beneficial. The same need for root system replenishment in alfalfa is necessary for grass plants as well. Stands slow to recover could use the additional growing days, especially with ample moisture to get as much recovery time in as possible prior to dormancy setting in.

Late planted cover crops might even benefit. Whether you're planning on grazing cover crops or using them for weed control or were delayed seeding because of harvest or the fear of fall armyworm feeding, a longer growing season might provide greater opportunity for increased ground cover before temperatures drop to maximize the benefits these crops provide.

Right now, it looks like a longer growing season is what we'll get (moisture might be a little more variable…) but what happen if temperatures plunge sooner than expected and the growing season ends before recovery is complete? Things get a little more complicated for sure.

The first concern would be the effect on very young or small plants trying to either get started or in recovery mode. A lack of time to amass ample leaf area and corresponding root growth for energy storage could equal a lack of survival. It might happen outright this fall or it could happen as a 'winterkill' type of situation. This is always a concern in alfalfa when we harvest too late and plants don't have ample time to recover before the growing season ends.

If they do survive, a second concern is spring greenup. One aspect of that is how quickly plants actually green up. If the root system is compromised, delayed greenup next spring is to be expected. A second aspect relates to forage productivity. It may not be a one-to-one relationship, but the tendency is certainly there for yields to be reduced when plants are slowed, taking off in spring.

Management decisions – and even factors outside our control - through the end of the current growing season often play a larger role in next year's production than we might think. We might be able to do a few things to help (reduce grazing pressure, address fertility needs, etc…), but understanding what plants are doing over the next couple of weeks can help us look ahead to next year as well.