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### **Early Season Cool Season Management**

Far too often the focus of this column has been some 'issue' in forage stands. Weather. Weeds. Fall Armyworms. You name it. Our forage crops have had the 'opportunity' to encounter just about every test possible – and now they're showing it.

In a few stands last week, cool season grasses on thin soils exhibited symptoms of drought stress. Soils were dry enough it was difficult to get a soil probe in the ground, and a few plants were even starting to head out – with very little height to them. Even with moisture, it's likely we'll see some production losses, increasing the need for attention to management as the season progresses.

Losses? Already?? Most of our forage base is cool season grass – brome and fescue that prefer temperatures into the mid 70's. We've already blown right through those temperatures on multiple occasions this spring. Leaf production declines as plants transition from vegetative to reproductive growth and above normal temperatures are pushing us quickly in that direction. Stressed plants in particular may try to get to reproduction sooner than later, reducing height and leaf area. Add in the 'issues' above plus years of stress from fertility, overgrazing, late haying, etc... and we likely started with reduced root energy levels and thinned stands. The result: it's time to at least be thinking about what we're going to do to help stands this spring – and beyond.

Start by evaluating your grazing management strategy. NRCS Rangeland Management Specialist Dustin Schwandt notes NRCS recommendations suggest grazing of smooth brome *begin* at six inches with grazing *stopped* when grass height falls to three inches. Stands damaged last year by fall armyworms might even benefit from increasing starting heights to ensure roots of smooth brome are not being damaged even more this year especially at the start of the growing season.

Meadowlark Extension District Livestock and Natural Resources Agent Ross Mosteller would suggest our grazing management mindset might need to adjust when forage production is below normal as well. He suggests taking a look at tactics such as reducing stocking rate, destocking/rest, shortening the grazing season, and supplementation to bridge the gaps. One – or all – deserve a second look if production levels in your pastures/hay fields are below normal.

Maybe everything turns around with favorable weather plus good plant growth, and this is a non-issue. Even so, it's never too early to start thinking ahead to how in-season grazing management – and even winter season forage needs – might have to be adjusted should the current trend of multiple challenges each season be the rule rather than the exception. Few stands are in a great position to weather a lot of stress. Being on top of issues early in the season might be one of the best things we can do to help stands longer term.