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Not Yet to the Finish Line

As fall sets in, field crops are reaching maturity, but forage crops have a way to go. Fall is a critical growth/recovery time for many forages and there's still management to implement now to help the stand not only through the rest of this growing season, but into next as well.

Start by looking at how much forage is left? Every forage has a 'minimum height' it we'd like to stop grazing so the plant can quickly recover, have leaf area to 'refill' root energy systems, and position it to survive winter and take off growing next season. For cool season forages, that height is four inches. For warm season forages, six or eight inches would be better. If you aren't at those heights now – it might be time to think through what you're doing from a harvest management standpoint to allow it to get there soon so it can prepare for dormancy.

Evaluate weed pressure. With the stresses stands have seen of late, stands are thin and weeds are prevalent. Identify what you have and determine whether they might still benefit from weed control programs or if they're 'done' and efforts will need to wait another year. It may take multiple applications, but you won't know unless you know what you have.

Keep in mind: not all the grasses we see out there are desirable. Foxtail has taken the opportunity provided by thinned stands and ample moisture into August to get a foothold – often at the expense of more desirable species. Open stands will also give broomsedge bluestem and other undesirable grass weeds the chance to germinate and take up space in the stand as well.

Scout for pests. Grasshopper numbers have been high this year. Fall armyworm levels have thus far remained mostly in check, but numbers to our west and south are on the increase and we've seen local 'spikes' in moth numbers as well. The forage they remove poses the same issue that overgrazing does. Fall armyworms will be here until it freezes. Keep scouting until the growing season is over to make sure they aren't adding damage to stands that have already struggled this season because of feeding pressure last year.

Foliar disease pressure has also been present this year, likely a result of long periods of overnight leaf wetness. They have thinned out areas in some stands to the point it almost looks like defoliation injury. While there isn't likely anything to do to combat these diseases, they are good to make note of as they, too, are reducing the stands ability to recover going into winter.

A nice August has given way to an early September that makes it feel more like July. We expect heat/drought during mid-summer, and forages usually have time to recover following those stresses. Stress this time of year gives a much shorter recovery window. We can't control the temperature or moisture, but if we can help stands have some level of increased resiliency against their extremes, we can help those forages for the long haul. Scouting stands now can help you encourage that resiliency this fall and start to build it even more into spring.