KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension
Meadowlark District

September 4, 2026

David Hallauer
District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

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.

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Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Summer Heat and Fertility

Earlier in the summer I dedicated this space to discussing heat stress in livestock, mostly because I'd been sweating my tail off at county fair and it was front of mind. Here we are again dealing with a heat wave in meteorological fall. Sun angle and shorter days seem to lessen the impact of these later heat stress events on livestock, but don't be surprised at pregnancy check to find some open females. Let's look at how heat stress affects reproductive success.

Heat stress can have lasting impacts on reproductive performance, reducing conception rates, increasing embryonic loss, and affecting bull fertility. The July heat event was a bad combination of heat, humidity, and inadequate nighttime cooling. Following extreme heat like this, producers may see reproductive consequences that extend well beyond the hottest days. Heat stress may be temporary, but its effects on reproduction can persist for months. Understanding those impacts helps producers evaluate breeding outcomes and prepare for future weather challenges.

Cattle do not have to appear to be suffering from heat-stress for reproduction to be affected. Research shows that body temperatures begin to rise as environmental temperatures climb, and fertility losses can occur before producers observe characteristic signs of distress. Some of these heat stress signs related to reproduction during the breeding season include; reduced expression of estrus at the end of the synchronization period or low detection of estrus, delayed return to cyclicity in postpartum cows, lower conception rates and increased early embryonic loss.

The first few days after fertilization are particularly critical. Elevated body temperatures during this period can compromise embryo survival before pregnancy is detectable. That is why herds exposed to extreme heat during the breeding season may experience pregnancy rates to be lower than expected. Others may observe a larger proportion of cows conceiving later in the breeding season, leading to a wider calving distribution.

It isn't just the cows and embryos that suffer heat stress effects. Prolonged exposure to heat can impair spermatogenesis, resulting in reduced sperm motility, lower sperm quality, and an increased percentage of abnormal sperm in bulls. Because sperm development takes approximately 60 days, the effects of a heat event are often delayed and may not become apparent until several weeks later. Consequently, bulls exposed to extreme heat in late July may not exhibit the full reproductive consequences until late September or early October.

Nothing can be done to change the impact of summer heat waves, but producers can use the information gained at pregnancy check to make informed management decisions moving forward. Because heat stress may have reduced fertility in both cows and bulls, be prepared for a higher percentage of open females than expected. What might be a frustrating situation can present the opportunity to increase selection pressure within the herd. Retaining only females that successfully conceived can help improve overall reproductive efficiency and concentrate resources on the most productive cows. Don't forget to conduct breeding soundness exams on bulls and manage around possible heat-related short-term infertility.

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Laura Phillips
District Extension Agent, Horticulture

Fall Garden Checklist

As autumn creeps closer we need to start preparing our gardens for our next growing season. While it might seem like garden work is done for the season, giving your garden extra TLC now can have big impacts on its productivity next summer. Here are some steps to take to boost your next growing season:

1. **Map your current garden:** If you haven't already, map out where your annuals are. When spring comes, you will want to refer back to this map to ensure you are rotating your plants to curb disease that may overwinter in the soil. Ideally, you should not put plants from the same family in the same location.
2. **Do a soil test and amendments:** If you have not done a soil test in the past couple years, it might be a good time to see where your soil is at. If you need to adjust the pH, doing it now will give your soil pH time to adjust.
3. **Split up perennial flowers**: Our spring-blooming perennials can be divided up in September and early October. You want them back in the ground well before the frost hits so their roots can re-establish before the winter. You can divide lilies, peonies, and irises. Make sure to look up how frequently can be divided, as not all plants can be divided each year.
4. **Clear out the weeds:** Do one last round of weeding and make sure to get those weeds that have gone to seed. This will help lower the number of weeds you need to deal with next spring.
5. **Clear out debris:** Remove debris from plants with disease or insect issues. Diseases and insects can overwinter in debris from infected plants. Rather than compost diseased or infected material, either add it to a burn pile or disposed of it in the trash.
6. **Take care of the leaves:** If you have leaves on your lawn, rather than rake them, go over them with a mower a couple times. This will prevent them from smothering the lawn but help provide nutrients for the soil and material for birds to nest with.
7. **If you are going to plant a cover crop:** Remove other plant debris from your garden and rake out the soil to prepare it.
8. **If you are *not* planting cover crops:** You can leave dead plant material in your garden until you plant next year, as will provide food and habitat for native pollinators, birds, and wildlife throughout the winter and early spring.
9. **Mulch tender plants:** After plants lose their foliage in late October, apply mulch to tender perennials and perennials planted in late fall. A layer of 4-6 inches of mulch will help prevent frost injury during the winter. These protective layers of mulch should be removed in early spring so that the plants can pop back up. Be sure to not apply mulch prematurely – if the plant is not yet dormant, the added insulation can post-pone their dormancy phase and cause more frost damage.

If you have questions on any of these steps or how to care for your garden, please reach out to our office for assistance.

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Teresa Hatfield
District Extension Agent, Family and Community Wellness

No article this week.

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Cindy Williams
District Extension Agent, Food, Nutrition, Health and Safety

Packing A Safe Lunch 101

When it's back-to-school time, I want to remind parents and families that the first important lesson of the school year is packing a safe lunch. All it takes is a quick refresher course. Here are some quick tips for packing a safe lunch for school or other outings.

- Always keep it clean. Wash your hands with warm water and soap, and use hot, soapy water to make sure food-preparation surfaces and utensils are clean. Teach your children to wash their hands with warm water and soap before they eat. Also, rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under running tap water and blot dry with a paper towel before packing them in your lunch.
- Be sure to keep hot foods, such as soup, chili or stew, hot by using an insulated bottle. Fill the bottle with boiling water and let it stand for a few minutes. Empty the bottle and then fill it with piping hot food. Keep the bottle closed until lunchtime.
- Insulated, soft-sided lunch totes are best for keeping perishable food cold, but metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags can also be used. If using paper lunch bags, create layers by double bagging to help insulate the food. A cold source, such as a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box, should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box. After lunch, discard all used food packaging and paper bags. Do not reuse paper or plastic bags.
- Freezer gel packs will keep foods cold until lunchtime but are not recommended for all-day storage.
- Try freezing single-sized juice packs overnight and placing the frozen juice will thaw by lunchtime, but it will still be cold. The frozen drink will also keep the rest of the lunch cold.
- Tell your child to use the refrigerator at school, if one is available. If not, make sure he or she keeps the lunch out of direct sunlight and away from radiators, baseboards and other heat sources found in the classroom.
- Any perishable food (such as meat, poultry, egg sandwiches, fresh-cut fruits and vegetables) not eaten at lunch should be thrown away.
- Keep a supply of shelf-stable foods for easy packing. These include crackers, peanut butter sandwiches, packaged pudding and canned fruits or meats.
- If you make sandwiches the night before, keep them in the refrigerator until packing up to go in the morning.