

Fall Grazing of Alfalfa

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Some good pasture still may be available this fall – from your alfalfa fields! Alfalfa can provide considerable, high-quality grazing this fall. Grazing avoids the problem of slow curing hay that often occurs during the fall, and it eliminates the cost of baling.

Many growers find that grazing alfalfa in the fall provides some special flexibility that often is useful this time of year.

Alfalfa makes an outstanding weaning pasture for spring calves; yearlings gain weight rapidly on fall alfalfa even after summer grass has already died off; cows gain excellent condition before winter by grazing alfalfa during the fall; and ewes and lambs perform very well on fall alfalfa. Standing alfalfa also can serve as an excellent protein supplement for livestock grazing adjacent crop residues like cornstalks.

Grazing alfalfa in fall or winter can reduce alfalfa weevil infestations by removing potential egg-laying sites. Some winter annual weeds also may be reduced by dormant season grazing.

Fall grazing of alfalfa is not without problems, though. Bloat always must be a concern whenever one-half or more of the top growth remains green, especially during the first three to five days after the alfalfa has been exposed to freezing temperatures.

After alfalfa has been frosted and started to dry down it has less tendency to cause bloat than summer alfalfa. However, this freeze-down is a slow process that often takes several weeks and multiple freezes.

To reduce the potential for livestock to bloat, fill them with hay or a full grazing before turning them onto alfalfa. Move them onto alfalfa or to new paddocks midday or later, preferably on a sunny day.

Avoid moving onto new alfalfa that is moist from dew, rain or irrigation water. Also, maintain access to dry hay or corn stalks while grazing alfalfa to help reduce bloat. Or you can swath your alfalfa ahead of grazing and let animals graze dry hay in the swath.

Of course, bloat protectants like poloxalene can be fed as blocks or mixed with grain. This can be an expensive supplement, but it works well when animals eat a uniform amount each day.

Also be careful not to damage your alfalfa stand. Only graze when fields are dry and firm. Reserve a small sacrifice area to graze and for feeding when soils are wet to avoid damaging the entire field. If grazing before alfalfa has gone dormant for winter, be sure to allow at least four to six weeks of uninterrupted fall growth for adequate winterization of plants.

If you aren't already doing so, consider alfalfa for late fall pasture. Its advantages greatly exceed any disadvantages.