

News Column

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### **Proper Timing of Last Alfalfa Cutting Can Improve Long-Term Productivity**

It may be tempting to squeeze out one last cutting of alfalfa in mid-October, especially if a late rain encourages late growth, but producers must consider the long-term effects of such a decision.

The last cutting of alfalfa for the year should be timed carefully since it could have a long-lasting impact on the productivity of the stand.

At this stage of the growing season, plants need to store enough carbohydrates to survive the winter. To do that, the last cutting has to be timed properly. If root reserves are not replenished adequately before the first killing freeze (24 to 26 degrees F.) in the fall, the stand is more susceptible to winter damage than it would be normally. That could result in slower early growth next spring.

The last cutting, prior to fall dormancy, should be made so there are 8 to 12 inches of foliage, or four to six weeks of growth time, before the average killing freeze date. This should allow adequate time for replenishment of root reserves.

For Hays our average date for a fall freeze of 32 degree Fahrenheit is October 10<sup>th</sup> based on the K-State Research and Extension weather data library information from 1961 – 1990. For northern areas of the state, particularly northwest, late September should be the latest date for the last cutting before dormancy. The first week of October is the cut off for southeast Kansas.

Later cutting dates could reduce root reserves during a critical time.

“About the worst thing that could happen to an alfalfa stand that is cut in mid-October would be for the plants to re-grow about 3 to 6 inches and then get a killing frost. In that scenario, the root carbohydrate reserves would be at a low point going into winter,” says Jim Shroyer a K-State Extension Agronomist, Emeritus.

After a killing freeze, the remaining forage (if any) can be hayed safely, he added. However, the producer should act quickly because the leaves will soon drop off.

More information on alfalfa management is available at county and district K-State Research and Extension offices or on the Web in the K-State publication C-683 “Alfalfa Production Handbook,” at: <https://www.bookstore.ksre.k-state.edu/pubs/c683.pdf>

