

News Column

Stacy Campbell

Cottonwood Extension District, Hays

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RAISE CUTTING HEIGHT WHEN FIRST HARVEST IS DELAYED

Rain has delayed most folks from cutting alfalfa. If you haven't taken first cutting yet, it might help if you slightly changed the way you cut this crop.

Have you harvested your first cutting of alfalfa yet? Even if it is not blooming heavily, you might be surprised to find that it already has started to grow your next cutting.

Walk into your alfalfa field before cutting and look closely at the base or crown of the plants. Do you see short, new shoots starting to grow? If so, these new shoots are the new plants that your alfalfa hopes to turn into your second cutting.

Look closely – how tall are these new shoots? Are many of them a couple inches taller than your usual cutting height? If you cut these new shoots off – along with the first growth – your alfalfa plants will have to start a whole new set of shoots for regrowth. This could cause a delay in second cutting regrowth by as much as one week.

Fortunately, you can avoid this delay. All you need to do is raise your cutting height just a couple inches so you avoid clipping off most of these new, second growth shoots. This is especially important for growers using disk mowers because they tend to cut very low. Your regrowth then will have a head start towards next cutting. And since the stubble you leave behind has quite low feed value anyway, the yield you temporarily sacrifice is mostly just filler.

Normally I suggest cutting alfalfa as short as possible because that maximizes yield and it doesn't affect rate of regrowth. But a late cutting that already has new shoots growing is different.

Don't blindly start cutting alfalfa when harvest is delayed. First look for new shoots, then raise cutting height if needed.

Proper Hay Storage

Weathering tends to lower the yield and nutrients available from your hay by about one percent for each month of exposed storage. High value, high quality hay that will be sold or fed to high value animals like dairy cows and horses should be stored under cover. A hay shed, a partially used machine shed, or any other shelter with a roof will be better than exposing your hay to what Mother Nature dishes out this summer.

Plastic wraps can be very effective, too, when good quality plastic is wrapped around bales enough times.

Next best may be tarps, but they have to be heavy-duty ones that can be tied down without tearing in the wind.

If uncovered storage is your only option, place bales and stacks on an elevated site with good drainage so moisture won't soak up from the bottom. Don't stack round bales or line them up with the twine sides touching – rain will collect where they touch and soak into the bale. Also, allow space for air to circulate and dry the hay after rain.

Stacy Campbell is an Agriculture and Natural Resources agent in the Cottonwood District. You can contact him by e-mail at scampbel@ksu.edu or calling 785-628-9430.