



By Mark Mayer, Green County UW-Extension Ag Agent

Fall Cutting Management of Alfalfa

Many dairy farmers will be looking at taking a 5th cutting of alfalfa this fall. If you are reading this and you have not yet taken your 5th cutting you should delay your last cutting into mid-October. This is also true for new seedings that may be full of weeds and didn't get well established until the rains later this summer. Alfalfa must either be cut early enough in the fall to regrow and replenish root carbohydrates and proteins, or so late that the plant does not regrow or use any of its root carbohydrates if you want good winter survival and rapid greenup next spring.

Research has shown that as long as alfalfa accumulates more than 500 growing degrees (GDD, base 41) after the last cutting, before a killing frost (25 degrees F. for 4 hours) it should regrow sufficiently, improving winter survival. This means we can cut as late as 500 GDD without hurting winter survival which is usually around September 10 for Green County.

On the other extreme, we can also cut so late that little regrowth occurs (less than 200 GDD's). This is usually around October 15th in this area. It's important to note you do not need to wait for a killing frost to take the last cutting. We must only wait until it is so cool that little or no regrowth will occur. Alfalfa quality changes very little in September so delaying cutting for better winter survival is a good practice. Maintaining a good potassium fertility level is also important for increasing the winter survival rate of alfalfa. September is a good time to top dress P and K to help the plants recover from the stressful growing season of 2012 and prepare them for winter survival.