

Alfalfa for Summer Pasture

When pastures are short and low quality during summer, what can you graze to maintain animal performance? Maybe alfalfa is your answer.

Most pastures have difficulty providing abundant, high quality grazing throughout the summer, regardless of whether they are drought stressed or not. Yearlings and calves can really use better pasture at this time. Both drought-stunted alfalfa and well-growing alfalfa might fill that role of a better quality temporary pasture.

But, how do you get started and how do you avoid problems with bloat? Begin by dividing fields so animals graze no longer than 5 days at a time on any one area. One rule of thumb is that one ton of standing alfalfa hay will provide about 45 cow days of grazing. If you estimate your alfalfa would yield one ton of hay if you cut it right now, then one acre should feed 45 cows for one day. Also if possible, limit the size of paddocks to 10 acres or less to get more uniform grazing. After grazing a paddock, plan grazing and haying so at least 35 days of regrowth will occur before harvesting the same area again.

To reduce bloat, begin grazing alfalfa after it begins to bloom. Short, drought-stunted, yet blooming alfalfa should be pretty safe. Also, be sure animals are full before first turning onto alfalfa and never let animals get hungry. In addition, begin grazing mid-afternoon and do not turn them onto fresh alfalfa that is moist with dew, rain, or irrigation. Yearlings tend to bloat less than cows, but feeding supplements like poloxalene, rumensin, and oxytetracycline can help reduce bloat for all classes of cattle.

These precautions and management practices can help you use alfalfa for pasture and overcome the late summer pasture slump.

Dr. Bruce Anderson, Extension Forage Specialist
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
314 Keim Hall—East Campus
Lincoln NE 68583-0915
402-4742-2577
banderson1@unl.edu

