

Irrigating Alfalfa During a Dry Spring

It's been a good spring for alfalfa growth overall, but many areas already are experiencing drought. When is the best time to start irrigating?

Alfalfa can use a lot of water. During spring growth it will require four to five inches per ton of hay. By mid-summer, though, it can take seven or eight inches to produce the same ton of hay. By fall, that may drop again to five or six inches per ton.

So what does this tell you about irrigating alfalfa when spring rains don't amount to much? It should tell you to start irrigating in the spring as soon as you have a shortage. Although it may seem wise to save some water for use in summer, especially if you only have a limited amount available, exactly the opposite is true. To maximize yield with limited water, you must produce as much yield as possible during the first cutting or two, when water use efficiency is highest.

So if you already are dry, don't hesitate to start irrigating. The last thing you want is to have your first or second cutting yield limited by a lack of irrigation water. As temperatures rise, it will take more water, and thus cost more, to produce each ton. So if you need to economize sometime and reduce water applications, do it in mid-summer, not now. Of course, summer yields will be lower, but if it costs too much to produce that extra yield, you are smart to use limited water when it will do you and your alfalfa the most good.

If you must decide on spreading water lightly across all acres or using heavier rates on fewer acres, I recommend heavier rates on fewer acres. It takes a couple inches just to keep plants green without growing. Once maintenance moisture is met, the rest produces growth. Tough times require tough decisions. Let's make the best ones.

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