Summer Heat and Forage Growth

When it suddenly turns "hooey boy hot" you know, 90 plus degrees and humidity so thick you can almost see it - cool-season plants suffer along with you and me. Alfalfa and clovers, bromegrass, orchardgrass, fescues, and wheatgrasses all hurt during hot weather.

Do you remember - before air conditioning - how drained you used to feel after spending a night when the temperature never dropped below 80? The same thing happens to cool-season forages, resulting in very slow growth, lower forage quality as plants burn up the good nutrients, and limited recovery of root reserves after defoliation. And if it also is dry these conditions can quickly become deadly.

Warm-season grasses are just the opposite. Millet, sudangrass, sorghums, and our native bluestems, gramas, switchgrass, and other warm-season grasses thrive when the temperature is around 90 degrees. Their metabolism runs at peak efficiency when it is hot so they grow rapidly while maintaining reasonable forage quality and good root growth.

Of course, this assumes these plants have adequate moisture. Once they dry up, these grasses will overheat too, just like cool-season grasses do at lower temperatures.

As you graze or hay, be aware of the stress weather is putting on your forage. When it's too hot, be prepared to allow plants to recover for a longer time before next use. And don't expect high feed values when the goodies are burned right out of the plants.

Proper expectations and management adjustments can limit the stress from stressful weather.

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