

Summer Irrigation of Alfalfa

Hot, windy days sure cause alfalfa fields to dry up quickly. Irrigation helps, but it can stimulate weeds and actually weaken alfalfa stands if not done properly.

Alfalfa uses a lot of water -- up to 40 inches a year and sometimes over 4 tenths of an inch in one day. No wonder irrigators find it difficult to keep up with these water demands. As a result, we often irrigate as soon as hay is removed from the field until we start the next cutting.

But, constant watering has its costs besides fuel, labor, and depreciation. Constant watering encourages grassy weeds like foxtail and perennial grasses like bluegrass to invade alfalfa. Constant watering also can weaken alfalfa plants by encouraging root diseases and by reducing oxygen content of the soil.

How can you avoid weakening your alfalfa and strengthening weeds with irrigation? You do it by modifying irrigation management to encourage deep rooting of alfalfa and dry surface soils during harvest.

Stop irrigating a couple days before harvest so the soil surface will dry out and become firm. Then, don't irrigate after harvest until regrowth is three to four inches tall. Shallow rooted weeds like foxtail and bluegrass then won't be able to grow until alfalfa already has a head start. And your alfalfa will regrow more rapidly because the roots will find more of the oxygen they need in soil that has not been saturated with water. Of course, this assumes you have been deep watering when you do irrigate so there is deep water available that alfalfa roots can get to that the weeds can't reach.

By putting on a little more water a little less frequently, your alfalfa can be cleaner, healthier, and more productive.

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