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### ALFALFA MANAGEMENT NOW

Most of our first cutting alfalfa has been cut and baled by now, for better or for worse. As we look at managing these fields headed into summer, here are a few management principles to keep in mind:

Alfalfa is a relatively drought-tolerant forage, and as such, does not have specific growth stages when it is less sensitive to water stress. If water is not available, the plant will slow or stop growing and go dormant. Then, when water becomes available, growth resumes.

While alfalfa's long growing season means it uses more water annually than other crops, it can be over-watered resulting in alfalfa plant injury and possibly weed invasion. Maintaining water use efficiency can be complicated due to multiple harvests preventing irrigation for about 7 to 10 days per growth cycle and frequent heavy equipment traffic compacting soils. To reduce compaction, stop irrigating 2-3 days before cutting the alfalfa and begin irrigating again after hay has been removed and plants have initiated regrowth.

Generally, the most yield impacting irrigation occurs just before the second cutting followed by the third and fourth growth periods typically requiring 6 to 7 inches of irrigation. Peak water needs are typically in July and August at 1/3 inch per day. However, hot, windy and dry days can move the maximum water demand up to ½ inch per day; so ET scheduling can provide economic benefits.

Many producers have seen extensive alfalfa weevil damage during this first growing period. Typically, alfalfa weevils are cool-weather insects. During this time of year adult insects would be exiting alfalfa fields seeking cooler spots for over-summering in nearby shady areas or under leaf litter. Although our extended cool spring may have favored cool-season plant growth, it has also dramatically increased alfalfa weevil feeding.

A second flush of these 3/16" green caterpillar larvae with a white back stripe may be feeding under windrows remaining in wet fields. So, what management strategies are recommended for late spring alfalfa weevil infestation?

In heavy infestations, chopping alfalfa for silage can reduce field cover for the insects. Usually, weevil development is controlled by hotter temperatures, so those who have already harvested may want to maintain an active scouting regime to decide if follow up treatments are required. Remember that these cool-weather insects seek shelter during the heat of the day, so scouting can be a challenge when they move into the alfalfa crowns seeking shade.

After scouting, insecticide treatments with pyrethroids (active ingredient ending in "thrins") may be needed following harvest to aid alfalfa regrowth. Remember pyrethroid insecticides can also have detrimental effects on any beneficial insects present, so field scouting is still encouraged before making final treatment decisions. You can find economic threshold recommendations in our Nebraska Extension Guide for Weeds, Insecticide and Fungicide Management (EC130).

Finally, those who seeded alfalfa this year know that management for these stands are different from established stands. Stems are spindly, roots are small and shorter, and growth is a little slower.

You can harvest seeding year alfalfa as early as 40 days after seedlings emerge, not planting. Alfalfa takes about 40 days to develop the ability to regrow from the crown after cutting. Plants cut before this point need at least one set of leaves remaining to regrow. So, if you need to cut early for something like weed or insect control, cut high.

Although alfalfa seedlings can be harvested 40 days after emerging, I think it's better to wait until around 60 days after emergence, at late bud to early bloom stage, before the first cutting. Yield will be a little higher and plants will withstand weather stress easier with a little extra growth. This extra time also allows increases root development, helping avoid problems from soil compaction or surface soil dryness.

After the first cutting, regrowth of seedling alfalfa will become more similar to established alfalfa, giving you the opportunity for two or three cuts the first year.

From irrigation to weevils to new plantings, alfalfa isn't a crop to plant and forget. For a stand to reach its full potential, it needs to be managed right.

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