

Drought Stunted Alfalfa - Cut or Leave

What should you do with your short, bloomed out dryland alfalfa

Everywhere you look, dryland alfalfa has stopped growing. Many alfalfa fields have plants six to twelve inches tall and getting more and more purple by the day. With little relief in sight, what should we do - hay it, shred it, graze it, or just leave it?

First the good news: while it stays dry you can do whatever you feel like doing and you aren't likely to hurt your alfalfa. The bad news is that if it stays dry you can't do anything good for it either.

As alfalfa continues to just sit there nearly dormant, it will slowly lose feed value and tonnage due to continued maturation as well as leaf loss from insect feeding, diseases, and simple old age. But, you probably need a yield of at least one-half ton per acre to justify the fuel, labor, and other expenses involved with harvesting hay.

Grazing might be relatively cheap in terms of out-of-pocket costs if you already have portable electric fence and don't need to spend much money to transport cattle or water. Plus, dry, bloomed out alfalfa has a pretty low risk for bloat - not foolproof, but common sense animal husbandry should enable you to graze safely.

If you can't graze and can't justify cutting hay, it's probably best to just leave it alone. Shredding or haying might stimulate your alfalfa to try and regrow. If it stays dry those new shoots could die off. Once your alfalfa does receive enough rain for regrowth it might regrow a little faster if it's cut, but it also will regrow following sufficient rain without cutting. In most cases, it's not worth the cost and time involved to shred, clip, or harvest low-yielding hay.

So pick the option best for you, and let's all pray for rain.

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