

Forages Nearing Critical Maturity Stages

LEXINGTON, KY.

After an extremely warm winter, many forage grasses and small grains used for forages are quickly nearing the stages where they need to be cut to maintain optimum feed quality, according to Ray Smith, extension forage specialist in the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture.

Smith said this is the earliest forages have matured in the seven years he's been at UK. Depending on the area of the state, this is two to three weeks ahead of schedule.

"Alfalfa and small grains lose nutrient value as they get to the later growth stages," Smith said. "However, nutrient values in small grains drop much quicker than in alfalfa."

Small grains, like wheat, rye and barley, are cut for high-quality silage used to feed dairy cattle. Producers should harvest them at the late boot stage to get the highest quality. Much of the wheat used for silage could reach this stage by mid-April.

For optimum quality and yield, alfalfa should be cut at bud stage, before the blooms are open. Orchardgrass needs to be cut at boot stage before the seed head emerges.

"Alfalfa in many areas of Southern Kentucky is ready to be cut now," Smith said. "Alfalfa in Central and Northern Kentucky is probably one to two weeks from being ready for its first cutting. Some parts of Kentucky will have orchardgrass at boot stage within one to two weeks."

Before harvesting, he suggested alfalfa producers scout their fields for damage from the alfalfa weevil. If damage is significant on stands that are ready for harvesting, producers should cut the alfalfa to control the insect. Producers should check their fields about five days after cutting to see if normal regrowth is occurring. If present in high enough numbers, surviving weevil larvae and adults can damage regrowth. If the alfalfa isn't ready for harvest and there is a significant amount of weevil damage, producers need to spray their fields with an insecticide. UK entomologist Lee Townsend said producers need to check the "days to harvest" section of the label when selecting products to see how long to wait between application and harvest. This interval varies with products and application rates.

In addition, other cool-season forages like tall fescue will be ready for cutting earlier than normal this spring.

"Ideally producers make a first cutting by mid-May to get a good quality feed, but this year, harvesting in late April may be too late to get high quality grass hay," Smith said. "Because a first cutting is needed earlier than normal, there's a very good chance for producers to get a high quality second cutting before the hot temperatures of summer set in."

Since producers are harvesting high quality



forages of all types, a lot of nutrients are going to be removed from the soils with the cuttings. Producers will want to follow fertilizer recommendations for replacing the lost nutrients found in UK extension publication AGR 1: Lime and Nutrient Recommendations. It is available online at <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/agr/agr1/agr1.pdf> or at the local office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service. Δ