

### ESTIMATE FORAGE INVENTORY NOW TO HELP PLAN NEXT YEAR'S CROP

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Each growing season unfolds a bit differently to affect total forage growth and the forage quality of your harvests. Making forage inventory and quality estimates in mid- to late summer can give you a jump on feed and crop planning for next year. All it takes are paper and pencil (or a spreadsheet if you're so inclined), and a little advance planning for next season.

The amount and quality of your forage inventory on hand should be key considerations in your upcoming decisions about alfalfa stand establishment and stand take-out or rotation decisions. Many farms also balance corn silage versus grain harvest decisions this time of year.

#### Consider:

- **Assessing alfalfa stands in late summer.** An early decision for alfalfa stand take-out removes the uncertainty of waiting until mid- to late spring to assess the full impact of winter damage, should that be of concern the following spring. Once you've made up your mind to take out an alfalfa stand, it's just a matter of timing. Thus, you can open up more options for planting date, weed control, fertilization, and tillage for the following crop.
- **Assessing yield potential field by field.** Count stems per square foot after cutting, when new growth is about 6 inches tall. Research shows that 55 stems per square foot provides full yield potential. If your soil is dry enough to limit alfalfa growth, you can still compare fields using stem counts as a comparative indicator. Just wait until after a rain perks up the crop.
- **Taking out older, less-productive alfalfa stands** with less-than-optimum productivity. In fact, it is important to take out and replace older stands for overall farm productivity. Such fields can be rotated to corn, with replacement alfalfa stand establishment planned for other fields.
- **Taking out fully productive alfalfa stands if your alfalfa feed inventory is surplus** and your alfalfa cannot be sold as a profitable cash crop. This can be the case with haylage, since it is not cost-effective to transport over long distances to forage deficit areas in the same way as hay.
- **Including the value of nitrogen (N) fertilizer savings from alfalfa in your assessment.** A fully productive alfalfa crop can release up to 300 pounds N per acre to a following crop, with continuing benefits in the second year after alfalfa. The N credit alone may tip the scales toward stand take-out in favor of a different crop, so sharpen your pencil and figure out whether a different crop makes sense in light of any surplus forage inventory you may have.
- **Cutting for quality rather than for yield.** Some locales have plenty of hay or haylage on hand, but not of the desired forage quality. If that describes your situation, your best bet for the remainder of the crop year could be to cut earlier for better forage quality even though it could mean sacrificing some yield. Sufficient post-cutting regrowth can be critical for root reserve replenishment during mid-September through mid-October in the Upper Midwest and Northeast. Cutting during this period reduces stand productivity the following spring, and can leave weakened plants vulnerable to winter damage. Consider this for any alfalfa stands you wish to keep, but harvest during fall without worry for any stands you've decided to take out.
- **Feeding more alfalfa and less corn silage if alfalfa is in surplus.** Any surplus of on-farm corn silage or alfalfa offers the opportunity for upcoming corn-grain harvest on more acres, for reduced grain-feed purchase or even grain sale, either of which can improve cash flow. The corn silage crop looks good in most areas, but received some stress where rain shortage was coupled with above-average summer temperatures. Your corn crop should be far enough along to make field yield estimates based on field history adjusted for current crop status. More rapid heat-unit accumulation will likely hasten harvest. Be sure to monitor crop maturity for early harvest potential.
- **That corn silage digestibility can't yet be measured.** The full effect of the growing season on corn silage digestibility remains to be seen. Stress that reduces stover yield often reduces lignification with a positive effect to stover digestibility. This effect can be overshadowed if grain component yield is cut short by stress. Remember, the grain



component of modern hybrids often contributes half or more of the digestible energy in corn silage. Therefore, growing conditions that impact grain yield also have an impact on overall corn silage digestibility.

**What do you gain by making alfalfa stand take-out decisions by late summer?**

1. More time to follow through with preparations of all kinds.
2. The opportunity to grow other crops for increased whole-farm-earnings productivity if alfalfa is in surplus.
3. N credits to improve cash flow associated with following crop costs.
4. A more aggressive fall harvest schedule for fields slated for take-out.
5. The opportunity to incorporate a preferred variety or trait when ready to establish new alfalfa stands.

**What are some crop-management options after early corn silage harvest or early alfalfa stand take-out?**

1. Controlling problem perennial weeds with a systemic herbicide application.
2. Applying manure before soil gets wet and prone to compaction.
3. Performing fall tillage, including incorporation of lime, phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) if needed for the following crop.
4. Planting winter small grains as a forage crop or cash crop for next year's harvest, then following with mid- to late-summer alfalfa seeding.
5. Planting a cover crop, with potential to graze in late fall.
6. Fall-seeding oats, with potential to harvest in late fall.

In summary, forage inventories are likely good or even in surplus for many farms, but may be less than desired in quality. If you have surplus forage, consider the opportunity for corn-grain harvest this fall to improve cash flow. *The focus of next year's alfalfa and corn silage decisions should be on building supply of high-quality forages, not just more tons.*