

Rebounding from Alfalfa Winterkill

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About 3 million acres of alfalfa were lost to winterkill across the Midwest. Much of the loss, in a broad zone around Lake Michigan and the Red River Valley, was caused by ice sheeting. Additional losses in east-central MN, north-central ND and northwestern WI were often associated with cold exposure due to limited snow cover. With first cutting approaching, consider these strategies for surviving alfalfa stands:

- Stands that were injured and kept should be managed conservatively *if* trying to maintain them beyond the 2005-growing season. That means delaying 1st harvest to give stands more time to recover.
- Given the economics of alfalfa yield and rotational benefits, it's often most profitable to push the surviving injured stands hard and plan to terminate them after the 2005 growing season.
- If Italian ryegrass was seeded into thinned alfalfa stands, don't expect a lot of ryegrass in the 1st cutting; look for significant ryegrass contribution to the 2nd and later cuttings. Leave swaths as wide as possible to speed drying.
- Consider terminating weak alfalfa stands after 1st cutting, and plant either:
 - corn for fall silage for maximum energy yield
 - sorghum-sudan, sudangrass, or hybrid pearl millet for multiple cuttings or grazing
 - foxtail millet for a one-cut, moderate-quality forage within 60 days
 - soybeans to mix with grass or corn during fall ensiling
- If mid-summer moisture is adequate, August-seed new stands of winter-hardy ($WSI < 2.5$) alfalfa varieties in fields where there are no autotoxicity concerns. That includes fields that have been out of alfalfa for at least a year, or fields on sandy ground (with adequate moisture) where alfalfa winterkilled this past winter.
- Consider mixing winter-hardy grasses with new alfalfa seedings. Grasses, in particular sod-formers, may be able to provide some protection and insurance against alfalfa heaving and cold exposure. From east to west within the MFA region, the best-adapted sod-forming grass companion transitions from low-alkaloid reed canarygrass to smooth brome grass to intermediate wheatgrass. These grasses produce good RFQ levels when harvested on alfalfa cutting schedules.

Visit the MFA website for links to more information on how to manage the alfalfa shortage (www.midwestforage.org).