

David Hallauer  
District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

### **Fall Alfalfa Management Thoughts...**

The investment we put *into* alfalfa means we want to get a lot back *out* of it as well. Maximizing production requires a lot of management, and that management doesn't stop until the growing season stops, with fall being an important management window.

When planning the last cutting, base it on end of season weather and growing conditions making the last cutting based on expected crown regrowth rather than one-tenth bloom. Ideally, the last cutting would be made to allow for eight to 12 inches of foliage regrowth or four to six weeks of growth time before the first killing frost (alfalfa will quit growing after the first hard freeze of below 26 degrees F) to allow adequate time for replenishment of root reserves. Assuming a mid-October freeze, harvest in early September to allow adequate recovery.

What happens if we have an inadequate recovery time frame? Alfalfa plants are right now storing carbohydrates to survive the winter. If root reserves are *not* adequately replenished before the first killing freeze in fall, the stand becomes more susceptible to winter damage potentially resulting in slower green-up/early growth next spring – even stand loss in severe cases. Good root reserves in the fall mean greater yield and quality next season.

Fall is a great time for soil sampling alfalfa stands as well. Test for pH, phosphorus, and potassium at a minimum, but consider sulfur and boron as well. Test to a depth of six inches (24 inches for sulfur). Contact any District Office for soil testing supplies/procedures.

We started the year fighting alfalfa weevil, and some stands are ending the year with fall armyworm pressure. Stands should be scouted, particularly following harvest, for fall armyworm feeding. In many cases, a stand will tolerate some feeding. If pressure is high, control efforts may be in order, so the stand goes into fall in good health rather than struggling to survive. If you have questions about fall armyworm scouting, drop me a line. One to two caterpillars per square foot can destroy seedling alfalfa while 10-15 per square foot can destroy foot tall plants.