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9 TIPS FOR FIELD MANAGEMENT

For most of the Midwest, April is the ideal time for pasture and hay field seeding and renovation. Soil temperatures are climbing and everyone's hopeful Mother Nature will provide a large enough window to get equipment and machinery in the field. Areas that are most affected need attention now more than ever – such as hay feeding locales, wind-swept stretches and poorly-drained spots.

This time of year is also when vital decisions should be made regarding overall forage field management. Perhaps the most important is fertility. Spring soil testing is critical for hay and pasture success. Without knowing fertility levels, building a forage plan is nearly impossible. Soil tests are relatively inexpensive and now that soil temperatures are increasing, it's as good a time as any to test soils; especially if they haven't been tested in the last 2-3 years.



FOLLOW THE FIELD MANAGEMENT TIPS BELOW FOR YOUR PASTURE AND HAY FIELD SEEDING THIS SPRING:

Pasture Management Tips

- 1. If rotational grazing, start grazing as soon as possible.** When producers wait to start grazing until they deem that first paddock as ready, other paddocks may become unmanageable due to excessive growth.
- 2. Go easy on spring nitrogen (N) applications.** And recognize that applying N to pastures is different than to hay fields. When managers are concerned with grass or forage getting away from them too quickly, early N applications can make the problem worse. Depending on the grazing system, holding off on N until later in the spring or even the fall might make more sense.
- 3. Relocate livestock to established grass paddocks or off of pasture when wet, muddy conditions become extended.** Allowing livestock to trample legume stands (or fields with a large percentage of legumes), often leads to irreversible crown damage.
- 4. Consider transitioning the most productive areas into hay.** Turning those high yielding spots into hay production (either before or after the first grazing cycle) can minimize forage losses and increase utilization of the entire pasture.
- 5. Clip pastures to help with weed control.** Our team gets asked several times each spring for recommendations on pasture weed control and/or herbicides. When both grass and legumes are present, options become more limited – which brings more cultural and mechanical practices into play.

Hay Field Management Tips

- 1. Make a solid stand evaluation to determine the best next steps.** Some universities recommend estimating ground cover percentage - as a guide, 3-year old bunch-type grass (like orchardgrass and tall fescue) or sod-forming grass (like smooth brome grass or Kentucky bluegrass) should have at least 50% ground cover. If not, the stand should be renovated. For pure alfalfa stands, we recommended counting stems per square foot. Count any stems (that a mower would typically reach) – more than 55 and the stand density is not limiting; less than 40 and we recommend replacing the stand. Our complimentary alfalfa stand count rings are the perfect tool for this job!
- 2. Hay fields absolutely need nitrogen to maximize potential!** Adding nitrogen (N) improves yields and boosts protein levels. Depending on the region, most cool season grasses need somewhere between 30 - 40 lbs. of N per ton of expected yield. Fall applications (of N and phosphorus) still make sense, however spring provides a golden opportunity to get back on track.
- 3. The type of livestock being fed affects the frequency of hay harvests.** For most areas of the Midwest, maximizing yield and stand persistence in both grass and legume stands occurs closer to full bloom (and closer to 45-day intervals during the season). When the goal is higher quality hay, first cutting should take place at boot stage (bud stage for legumes). Expect successive cuttings to fall about one month apart.
- 4. If hay from a winter small grain is planned, understand the limitations.** Small grain hay crops offer the highest quality when harvested at the late-boot stage (around 15-20% moisture). This stage of cutting is also recommended when harvesting small grains with rough or jagged awns, as these “beards” can cause irritation to the eyes, mouth, and tongue of livestock. However, extending the harvest until early milk stage offers the best compromise between high quality and dry matter tonnage.

REFERENCES: Cornell University, Purdue University, Iowa State University

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