



## Fall Management of Alfalfa

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September 2005

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Forage Specialist for years have recommended an alfalfa “no-cut” window from September 1 through October 15. This conservative recommendation usually guarantees that the alfalfa has been cut in enough time to regrow and replenish root carbohydrates or late enough that no regrowth occurs. Being conservative, I prefer to stick to this recommendation, but you might be asking yourself what if I don’t follow this recommendation. The standard Extension answer is, it depends. While you ponder this answer, keep in mind that the decision to take a fall cut should involve weighing the risk of winter injury against the need for additional forage. If you don’t need the forage, don’t risk losing it next spring by cutting it this fall.

Key to this discussion is understanding that there are a number of factors you can control to improve the health of your alfalfa and thus reduce the stands potential for winter injury. Controllable factors begin with the selection of alfalfa varieties with resistance to several diseases and good winter hardiness. Soil fertility management is also vitally important for maintaining productive alfalfa stands. Potassium (potash) is particularly important for developing plants that have good winter survival. Finally, the more cuttings made to alfalfa in one season and the older the alfalfa stand at harvest time the greater the potential for winter injury. If you’re interested in scoring your risk of winter injury, Dan Undersander, Extension Forage Specialist, has developed a factsheet entitled “Calculate Risk of Alfalfa Winter Injury.” It can be found at: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/forage/pubs/winter.htm>

Recent research in Quebec has helped better define this “no-cut” window by indicating that alfalfa needs 500 growing degree days (GDD) after the last cutting to regrow sufficiently for good winter survival. This research also showed that if harvested after the 200 GDD or less level insufficient regrowth occurred and root reserves would not be used up. This GDD is calculated as the average of the daily minimum and maximum above 41 degrees until a killing frost of 25 degrees.

As an example, the graph, on the bottom of this page, from Marshfield shows the probability over a 30 year period of accumulating either 500 GDD or less than 200 GDD. At Marshfield, 91% of the time 500 GDD was accumulated after Sept. 1. This percentage falls to 71% and 29% with each successive week. Thus, not harvesting after Sept.1 is the safe alternative, but oftentimes being a week late was not detrimental. We also see that harvesting at the end of September only gives a 16% probability of less than 200 GDD. Thus waiting till mid-October will often be the safe bet. If you'd like to see additional graphs from around the state the full report developed by Dan Undersander Extension Forage Specialist and Bill Bland Extension Climatologist is at:

<http://ipcm.wisc.edu/wcm/pdfs/2004/UndersanderCuttingAlfalfa.pdf>

