Tips for grazing legume hayfields to provide emergency forage to livestock – July 2012

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As the current dry conditions continue, many farmers are faced not only with the decision of how to feed their grazing livestock, but also whether it is economically viable to harvest alfalfa- or clover-grass hayfields that have had limited growth in recent weeks, but are maturing and losing quality. One answer may be to consider grazing those hayfields to utilize the forage. What recommended management practices should producers use when grazing hayfields?

- Do not allow animals to graze before alfalfa or clovers reach early flowering stages. This ensures that the plants have stored adequate root reserves and will also decrease bloat potential.
- Use temporary electric fencing to control grazing and move animals frequently to a new section of hayfield. In addition to rationing the forage available from hayfields, grazing management and rotation encourages animals to consume the entire forage plant. This reduces bloat hazard and encourages more uniform forage removal during grazing.
- Monitor grazing and move animals to a new paddock to leave a forage stubble height of 4 - 6 inches to avoid overgrazing.
- Establish a separate loafing area for mineral, salt and water access to reduce damage to hayfields or limit the amount of time spent grazing hayfields. When rains resume, remove animals from hayfields to prevent trampling damage.
- Provide hay and other feeds as needed to supplement grazing and balance the ration.
- To reduce potential for bloat, do not place hungry animals on legume-based hayfields. Consider using poloxylene (a bloat preventative supplement), which is available in mineral block form or as a powder that can be mixed with grain rations. Observe animals frequently and remove animals that show early bloat symptoms for treatment.
- After grazing, allow hayfields to rest at least 30 - 42 days after regular growth resumes. Here in southern Wisconsin, all hayfield grazing should be completed by late August or early September to ensure that forage plants have adequate time to recover from drought stress as well as replenish carbohydrate reserves prior to winter.

Finally, evaluate soil fertility needs in grazed as well as harvested hayfields and consider applying recommended fertilizers this fall before the growing season ends to further help plants recover from the stresses encountered during this growing season.