



# Forage Management

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## TIME TO CHECK THE PROGRESS OF YOUR FIRST CUTTING

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In a recent discussion about harvest strategy, the conversation turned to identifying fields for heifer hay, and I found myself asking the question “Why set a goal for anything less than dairy quality feed?”

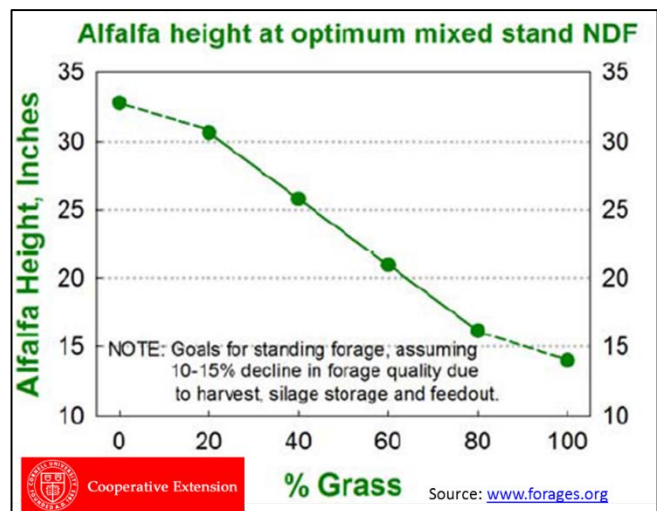
To loosely paraphrase a common saying, stuff happens. Weather, equipment breakdowns, etc. are likely to result in fields that will be harvested later than the ideal timing throughout the year, and that can be your heifer hay. Additionally, if everything goes perfect, and you end up with every harvest being prime feed, that is not a bad situation. And, even if you end up buying some heifer feed, that class of feed is far easier to purchase than prime dairy feed.

Changes in harvest management on many farms have resulted in an evolution of first cutting going from a necessary evil that had to be dealt with in feeding programs, to the most desired crop on many dairies, and grasses have gained as much or more respect than alfalfa for their performance in lactating diets.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

### Timing First Cutting

- Stop planting corn when hay is ready to harvest.
- Determine the proportion of alfalfa and grass in the stand.
  - Due to the growth habits of the crops, the percent alfalfa often appears higher than it actually is.
  - Dairy One offers an analysis that determines this percentage. This test can be performed on last year's crop from storage.
  - Another strategy is to sample this year's crop standing in the field about a week before you expect to harvest and send the sample to the lab.
    - This only works if the sample is representative of the entire field.
    - Given that our eyes often tell us there is more alfalfa there than there actually is, be prepared to harvest earlier than anticipated if the sample comes back with a higher percentage grass.



- Utilize alfalfa height as an indicator for alfalfa and grass harvest timing.
- Check with your local Cornell Cooperative Extension Agriculture Team about forage quality monitoring efforts in your area.

### Harvest Strategy

- Have everything in place to roll when fields are ready to be cut.
  - Harvest Team
  - Equipment
  - Storage Site
- Be prepared to fit harvest in narrow weather windows without compromising quality or forage dry matter goals.
  - “Hay in a Day” can improve forage quality and allow for quality harvest in narrow weather windows.
    - True wide swathing is a swath that is laid out at greater than 80% of cutter bar width.
    - A mower without conditioners for “un-crimped” hay will accelerate dry down.
- Storage
  - Store at the proper dry matter content at harvest.
  - Consider the use of inoculants, especially for forage destined for feed out in warm months.
  - For Bunk Silos/Drive Over Piles, consider ***Packing Weight, Packing Weight, Packing Weight and COVER.***
- BE SAFE!

### Nitrogen on Grass

- Hopefully you put N on your grasses this spring and will reap the benefits at first cutting. Following first cutting is another great time to fertilize grasses with N. The return on your investment is as close to a guarantee in farming as you can get. Work by Jerry Cherney at Cornell indicates the optimum strategy involves a total of 200 lbs N/acre for the year. This is often a split application of N with 100 lbs N/acre at spring green-up and an additional 100 lbs N/acre after first cutting. Whether you were able to apply the spring application or not an application after first cutting can still be beneficial.

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