

Early Cutting Of Alfalfa To Ease Drought Stress

Jimmy Henning, Department of Agronomy

Early harvesting of alfalfa stands in north Missouri can reduce soil water loss, produce higher quality hay, and possibly save an insecticide treatment for alfalfa weevil.

North Missouri producers are probably looking at alfalfa stands that are shorter than usual and have increasing numbers of alfalfa weevil. One option they should evaluate is that of taking an early first harvest. Cutting earlier than usual this year has the advantage of:

1. Reducing the soil water loss by removing the leaf surface area that is transpiring the moisture into the atmosphere,
2. Producing hay that is higher in protein and energy content than hay harvested later, and
3. Possibly saving an insecticide application for alfalfa weevil.

These advantages do have cautions, however. Early harvest should only be considered for well fertilized, healthy stands of alfalfa because early harvest is a stress that will have to be managed for a stand to remain healthy and productive. Allow the stand to recover from this stress by allowing the second cutting to go to half or full bloom before harvesting.

The alfalfa weevil benefit is not absolute. Early harvest will stop its damage to this cutting, but the weevil can attack the regrowth. So, watch the stubble closely for weevil feeding activity, and be ready to spray to protect the second cutting.

If there is a good side of dry weather, it is that it results in excellent hay curing conditions. Let's try to make the best of a poor situation and make some good quality first cutting alfalfa hay.