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# Technical Bulletin

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## Fall Alfalfa Management

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This week I noticed many signs that fall is coming. The daylength is getting shorter. The foxtail and crabgrass in my lawn are aggressively trying to put on seed heads. My wife is back to school shopping. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it is time to think about getting ready for winter!

If you are an alfalfa producer that means managing your stand to get the best winter survival and the most out of next year's crop.

To cut or not to cut is often the question. If you evaluate the stand and decide that you aren't going to let it go another year the answer is easy. Cut whenever you want to. For the stands that you are going to keep the decision can be more difficult. It is important to give a high producing stand a five to six week's "rest" in the fall. This allows the crown roots to build up carbohydrates that will be used as energy to make it through the winter. In my area of central Wisconsin, this usually means avoid cutting between September 1<sup>st</sup> and October 15<sup>th</sup>.



Picture courtesy of Mark Seem, LG Seeds

If you are short on forage and would like to take another cutting it is important to wait not just until after the first frost but until at least two nights in a row of 25 degrees or lower. If you decide to cut, leave more stubble (4-6"), and I would also recommend leaving strips of uncut alfalfa to "catch" more snow, especially in larger open fields. The best thing for vigor and winter survival of the stand is to not cut it at all after early September.

Fall fertilization is just as important to alfalfa winter survival as cutting management. The most important nutrient for winter survival is potassium. Potassium is important for the movement of sugars, making sugars or photosynthesis, and water relations. Long story short, more sugars moving more efficiently through the plant leads to high yields and better winter survival. It is important to split apply your K needs usually after first cutting and right after the last harvest before the "rest" period.

Fall is also a good time to think about the field you plan to seed two years out. This allows you to take soil tests and make sure you get your pH, phosphorus, and potassium levels up to snuff, well before the seeding year. This will improve stand establishment and productivity.

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