



Grazing Hay Fields

By John McGregor, MFGA Extension Support

Manitoba's extremely dry conditions this past summer brought forage yields to 20-60 per cent of normal in many areas and dry pastures went dormant very early in the grazing season.

The recent rains have brought greener pastures but due to the lateness of the season, growth is very slow or almost non-existent, providing very little additional feeding and forcing producers to supplement cattle on pasture.

Hay fields that were cut early enough to prevent them from going dormant, have been able to take advantage of late August to early September rains to add some additional growth. In cases where growth has been adequate, producers will be looking to take a final cut after the Critical Harvest period of the alfalfa. For those whose fields have good growth but are not tall enough to take as hay and still leave adequate stubble (or don't want to incur the cost of harvesting) may want to consider grazing these fields. Cows harvest for next to nothing, other than perhaps some fencing and water provisions.

There are some factors to be aware of when grazing a hay field. Cattle can bloat while grazing alfalfa, with the risk of bloat being higher immediately following a frost. Bloat risk is reduced if there is some grass mixed with the alfalfa.

By introducing animals to the hay stand in the mid to late afternoon, you can reduce the risk of bloat due to the alfalfa component. Cows have the largest meal of the day in the morning and additional meals mid-afternoon and in the evening. Lower feed intake in the afternoon reduces the amount of alfalfa the animal will eat and means less risk of a digestive upset.

A killing frost of -5 to -6 C for four to five hours tends to increase digestibility of the plant. The cell walls rupture, making the contents immediately available to rumen microbes when consumed and can increase the risk of bloat.