



Is It Time to Replace That Alfalfa Stand?

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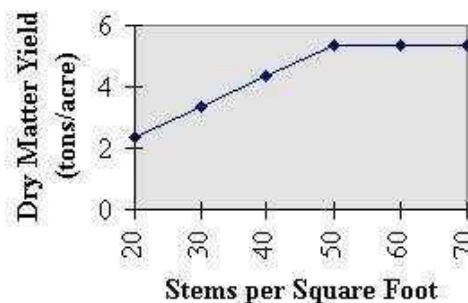
The winter of 2016-17 was hard on many of the alfalfa stands in Manitoba. Although we had adequate snow cover on most fields, rains and warm weather in January and February damaged fields. As spring green up started, producers across the area realized there was extensive damage to the alfalfa and, in some cases, those fields were worked down and seeded to annual forages or grain crops. For others, the degree of damage wasn't as cut and dry, nor was the decision to terminate the stand as easy. Some fields did green up, while in other situations producers needed the forage even though the stand may not have been 100%.

Some of the alfalfa plants that managed to survive the harsh conditions are now showing accumulated effects of all that stress. Add in the stress from harvest, plus any insect damage or leaf diseases, plants that were old or weak starting out this spring may simply have too much root disease and not enough healthy roots to keep going.

Have you taken a good look at your alfalfa stands lately? They might be getting a little thin. Now is the time to check fields to determine if they need to be replaced either with a new seeding this August or next spring. If weeds are becoming a problem, that's usually a good indication the stand is getting thin and needs to be replaced. If the yields you are seeing after the first and/or second cut are less than what you would consider economical then it may be time to replace that stand.

Alfalfa generally needs to produce 55 or more shoots per square foot to maximize yield. Older fields with less than 25 shoots per square foot coming from two or three plants should be replaced. Very productive sites should have over 40 shoots per square foot coming from four to six plants. You should also be looking at the roots. If they are discolored in one-third to one-half of the tissue they might survive this coming winter, but these plants will not yield well next year. If crowns and taproots show extensive brownish discoloration or are becoming mushy and partly rotted, survival through another winter may not be possible.

Alfalfa Stem Count and Yield Potential



It's sometimes difficult to know what to do when winterkill completely takes out your alfalfa stands or leaves them patchy and unhealthy alfalfa winterkill is sporadic and almost unpredictable. If we have little or no snow, then the risk of winterkill is greatly increased but still not guaranteed. If we have an average amount of snow this winter, then damage from cutting hay in September/October from a winter-hardy alfalfa variety should be minimal. There are many options that can be considered, depending on the calendar date, timing, urgency for feed, and forage yield and nutrient quality requirements. If winterkill is identified early, the best option is usually to replace the winterkilled stand by seeding a new forage stand in a new field in the crop rotation. If you are looking at your alfalfa fields at this time of year and seeing the damage due to winterkill or seeing normal decline due to age of stand, now is a good time to anticipate declining alfalfa production and replace those fields on your terms instead of Mother Nature's.