

David G. Hallauer
District Extension Agent
Crops & Soils/Horticulture

The Effects of Late Season Usage on Cool Season Grasses

Forage management this time of year is a balancing act: back off grazing and (potentially) give up forage we could really use right now or go ahead and use what we can hoping stands will come out on the other side as strong as ever. There isn't one right answer.

As a general rule, perennial forages will benefit from a period of rest and regrowth prior to fall dormancy. When moisture is adequate and temperatures optimum (remember: the optimum temperature for warm season grasses is vastly different than that for cool season forages), grasses grow rapidly. Photosynthesis occurs and green leaves transfer energy to leaves. When adequate leaf area is attained, energy is translocated to root systems. This maintains the plant through winter and initiates spring green-up. It's a simple, but often overlooked process that has a lot to do with how plants prosper/perish, and can be a tough one for forage producers trying to balance their forage need with their available forage resource.

Take the opportunity now to take a second look at pastures/hay fields. Four to six inches of green growth is the *minimum* suggested height prior to entering dormancy. Plants with less regrowth often don't have the photosynthetic capacity to simultaneously produce top *and* root growth, meaning root systems may be weakened going in to dormancy. A weakened root system now may result in slower green up – and potential yield reductions – in the future.

If you find forage growth less than desirable, consider steps you can take prior to dormancy to help with stand recovery. In pasture, it may mean reduced grazing pressure. In hay fields, there may be little you can do outside of forward planning for next season. Either way, knowing where you stand now can aid in your management of that stand well in to the future.

Sunscald Prevention

Planting trees is hard work: dig a hole the right size, plant at the right time, provide the appropriate amount of water, etc... Even if you do it all correctly, Mother Nature can throw us a curve. This summer, that curve was above normal temperatures and below normal precipitation. It can also happen in winter, with damage in the form of sunscald and bark cracks to young, smooth, thin-barked trees like fruit trees, honeylocusts, ash, oak, and maple.

Research out of Georgia has shown that on warm winter days, the southwest side of a peach tree's trunk may reach temperatures as much as 40 degrees warmer than bark in the shade. When warming occurs, bark tissue loses cold hardiness and cells become active. Active cells are then susceptible to lethal freezing when temperature drops at night. The result: bark tissue that becomes sunken and discolored in late spring. This bark eventually cracks and sloughs off. While trees can recover, they often require watering when dry.

If you have any of the thin barked trees referenced above, consider preventative measures in the form of a light-colored tree wrap to young or recently planted trees. Apply the wrap in October/November, starting at ground level and extending to the start of the first branches. This will help protect the tree in winter. Remove the following March to keep the wrap from damaging bark during the next growing season.