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Fall Forage Stand Evaluations

We're pretty good at looking *across* forage stands, but not necessarily *down* on them. This is particularly true of hay fields we may not have even returned to post-harvest. Fall has arrived, however, and that means fewer days with plants still alive for a forage stand evaluation.

Start with a look at your primary forages. If you have a yard stick, measure grass height to see how well they might have recovered. Summer moisture perked some stands up, only to have warm/dry weather late in the growing season set things back a bit. If grazing/haying occurred late and plants didn't have time for recovery (four inches of regrowth would be good...), stands could be compromised. We may not see immediate shifts or changes but stands without the chance for adequate recovery may green up slower the following spring and can experience reduced winterhardiness as well. Unless the growing season is 'extended' and conditions improve to allow for recovery, you may not be able to do much, but at least you'll have an idea as to whether recovery was ample or lacking.

A second look should be given to the 'other' forages out there. Warm season grasses like foxtail or purple top or broomsedge bluestem are often easily identified this time of year, providing an opportunity to see if they are increasing in frequency. Some are simply indicators that cool season grasses don't like a hot dry summer as well warm season species. Others (broomsedge bluestem in particular) can give us clues about issues with soil fertility. The presence of the warm season Old World Bluestems can be a first indicator of the presence of an undesirable invader that needs attention soon before it takes over.

While you're out, consider a soil sample. Fall is great for sampling, so long as you can consistently get a probe or shovel in the ground to a consistent depth (if you cannot, consider waiting to avoid skewed results from uneven sampling depth). Having results now also allows you sooner than later to start planning your cool season grass fertility program for next season.

In many cases, we're likely to see broadleaf weeds or less than desirable grasses – and it will be too late to do much about them (look for musk thistle rosettes. They *can* be treated this fall). That doesn't mean we can't start looking ahead, however, to formulate a plan to improve the health of our forage stands even in advance of the next growing season.