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Fall Grazing of Alfalfa

There is a notable change in the air this morning as I write this. Freeze warnings are being announced, with excessive heat warnings seeming still to be recent experiences - you've got to love Kansas weather! A killing freeze signals the end to many things, but it can also mean the beginning for others. In many areas, fall forage is running short this year and there could be interest in grazing alfalfa this fall/winter. Alfalfa can provide good grazing opportunities, but comes with considerations for both the plant and animal health sides of the equation.

In some cases, the last cutting of alfalfa may not have had enough tonnage to warrant haying, but still has enough biomass for livestock to benefit from grazing. In general, a properly managed alfalfa stand should have good regrowth following a killing freeze. Another positive situation is when an alfalfa field sits adjacent to field with crop residue. Standing alfalfa can provide a protein source to help livestock better utilize the residue. A side benefit is that grazing alfalfa in late fall or winter can reduce alfalfa weevil infestations by removing stems and plant parts that serve as a wintering site or a spring laying site for weevil eggs.

All classes of livestock can benefit from grazing alfalfa. Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have shown yearlings can have 1.5 to 2.5 lb/d ADG (average daily gain) and cows can increase body condition score before harsh winter months. One of the greatest concerns for livestock is bloat. Unfortunately, you never can be completely certain that alfalfa won't cause bloat, as it is in the class of bloating legumes. Feed additives such as poloxalene and ionophores can limit bloat risk, but require regular consumption to be effective.

Bloat risk is much lower a week after a hard freeze that causes wilting, so one week post hard freeze is a good run of thumb for turning out. Always use good management methods to help reduce the risk further. This includes; having full rumens before turning out to alfalfa, wait until midday (after frost or dew is gone) before turning out, provide other dry, palatable feeds or even bloat retardants and defiantly keep a close eye on animals for the first couple days.

Alfalfa plants need six weeks of uninterrupted growth prior to a killing freeze to properly winterize. Winterization allows for accumulation of energy in the roots of alfalfa plants. While alfalfa can be grazed during this time, it is not recommended unless absolutely needed. As with a late cutting, any harvest will increase the likelihood of winterkill and impact future productivity. Fall grazed alfalfa can be incredibly high-quality but low quantity. Graze lightly leaving at least eight inches of stubble on average to minimize depletion of the stored energy reserves.

Just like with normal range and pasture settings, rotational grazing can be a good tool to more effectively utilize standing, frozen alfalfa. Properly managed grazing may allow plants to better winterize than a late hay cutting but is still a risk for the stand. Plan grazing to be done when the field is dry and firm. If the soil is too wet, animal hooves can damage plant crowns. Having a sacrifice area or an adjacent lot ready to pull animals into if conditions get wet, can avoid excessive damage to the stand.

There is often fear associated with grazing alfalfa due to bloat potential or hurting the alfalfa stand. These are very valid concerns, but with additional management and timing, alfalfa stands can provide valuable supplemental forage in the fall and winter months. Alfalfa can be grazed safely, just be careful and attentive. K-State's [Alfalfa Production Handbook C683](#) provides additional information.