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### ***Managing Forages in the Early Fall***

Feed costs make up a big part of the cow-calf budget, making them a focal point of most producers. Forage management now could help keep at least some of those ‘costs’ at bay.

First, remember that forage recovery prior to dormancy is important. One of the reasons we discuss grazing/haying height is because maintaining appropriate forage biomass is integral to the plant’s ability to get ready for winter and take off again next spring. For cool season grass pastures, maintain five to six inches of height at all times. That means managed grazing as we approach the end of the growing season or avoiding harvest that might prevent timely recovery.

Alfalfa stands deserve the same type of pre-dormancy attention. Make the last cutting, so there will be eight to 12 inches of foliage (four to six weeks of growth) prior to the first killing frost (on/around mid-October) to allow adequate time for root reserve replenishment. If you haven’t taken that late cutting by now, consider delaying until after the first killing freeze. Harvest now has the potential to reduce the stand and slow green up next spring.

If extending the growing season is of interest, manage accordingly. Tall fescue tends to tolerate late fall/winter grazing better than brome grass or native species - with much greater quality – but only when managed appropriately. Avoid overgrazing now that might reduce winter stockpile opportunities that could help reduce feed costs.

Now is also time to finalize decisions on cover crops for grazing. Want to see what some of your options are? Check out the Midwest Cover Crops Council Selector Tool available online at <http://mccc.msu.edu/covercroptool/>. Simply input your location and the purpose of the cover crop planting and then check out the results. If you want further information on a particular crop, including seeding rates, termination methods, performance, and cultural traits, a simple click on the crop will provide it. The tool has recently been updated to reflect changes in weather data and research in the state.

Fall is *not* ‘cruise control’ time for forage crops. There’s still a lot of management season left to make sure our forages finish the growing season strong with an eye towards next year.

### ***Adding Organic Materials to the Garden***

When we talk about improving soil structure in the garden, we typically focus on the addition of composted materials. That can be a slow process, and a bit of a waiting game as materials in the compost pile break down and become usable.

Fall, however, is a great time to bypass that compost pile by adding organic materials directly to the soil rather than composting. Used up mulch, rotted silage, fallen leaves, even grass clippings (unless treated with a crabgrass *killer*...) can be tilled directly in to the garden area and allowed to break down through the winter as the garden sits idle.

Spread materials across the garden to a depth of three inches and till in (never incorporate when soils are too wet or we’ll hurt the soil structure we’re trying to help...). Shredding of coarser materials is suggested. Material decomposes quickly as long as temperatures remain warm, so the process can be repeated every two weeks. Later in the fall, it may take longer. This process can be repeated from now until late November to early December.