

Winterkill damage not enough to affect overall alfalfa market

By HOLLY SPANGLER

ALONG with plenty of ice and snow, the long, hard winter brought speculations about winter crop injury — specifically, that of alfalfa, a crop that accounts for 350,000 acres in Illinois.

According to Extension specialist Jim Morrison, winterkill may have taken 15% of Illinois' alfalfa acreage, with most damage occurring across central Illinois, from Galesburg to Peoria to Bloomington. "There were some real severe alfalfa

Key Points

- Winterkill may have affected 15% of Illinois alfalfa acres.
- Widespread winter injury is not likely across northern Midwest.
- Hay prices expected to remain soft but steady through 2009.

heaving problems on heavier, poorer-drained soil across that area," he describes.

Little heaving occurred farther north, even though alfalfa winterkill is typically thought of as a northern problem.

The decrease in acreage may affect local hay markets, but because it wasn't widespread, Morrison doesn't expect it to impact the overall market.

Setting a price

The general hay market has remained soft, following the shortages of a couple of years ago.

"After that, everyone baled everything they could," says Tyler Brown, a custom baler and hay producer from Gillespie.

And plenty of rain in 2008 made for high tonnage. "Every

ONLY THE BEST: High-quality alfalfa hay is a big part of Illinois hay producers' business, in demand by in- and out-of-state dairy and horse producers.

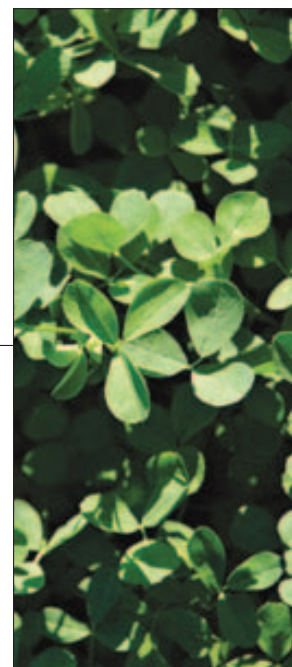
cutting was like the first cutting," Brown adds.

In years past, Brown often filled orders for customers from out of state, where dry conditions limited hay production. Not so last year. "There was no drought last year, and I didn't have the outside-Illinois customer base calling," he says.

Nonetheless, in a market Morrison describes as "soft but steady," producers remain both optimistic and realistic about 2009 hay prices. Brown hopes to see his small squares go for \$180 to \$200 a ton, and large squares for \$140 to \$150 a ton.

That's off from what his hay fetched in 2008, when small bales went for \$225 to \$240 and large bales for \$160.

"It'll all depend on how bad the winterkill was in the northern part of the country," Brown adds.



How to avoid winterkill

WANT to get your alfalfa through the winter uninjured? Consider the following tips from Jim Morrison, Extension crops educator from Rockford.

■ Choose a variety with a good winter-hardiness rating, measured on a scale of 1 to 6. One is the most winter hardy,

and 6 is not winter hardy.

■ Look for a good disease-resistance package.

■ Replant as necessary. An older stand will not survive winter as well.

■ Ensure adequate soil drainage.

■ Don't harvest too late. In northern Illinois, Morrison says not to take the last cutting after Sept. 1. Dormant cuttings can be effective after mid-October, but only in a healthy, well-established stand.

■ Mixing alfalfa stands with some grasses tends to lessen winter injury, thanks to the additional ground cover provided through the winter.

Shop for hay online

BUY or sell hay at some of these favorite Web sites:

- www.agr.state.il.us/markets/hay
- www.haytalk.com
- www.haybarn.com

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