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PHOTO BY HARLEN PERSINGER



Get cutting

DON'T DELAY: Delaying when you take first-cutting alfalfa can greatly reduce forage value and forage quality.

By **JERRY CLARK**

THE rock band Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers had a hit single titled "The Waiting." The lyrics say, "The waiting is the hardest part. Every day you get one more yard. You take it on faith. You take it to the heart. The waiting is the hardest part." Waiting is sometimes the hardest part with trying to manage first-cutting alfalfa, too.

The wait for spring and alfalfa harvest seemed to be longer than normal this year, with prolonged snow cover and a record number of below-zero days. As winter finally gives way to spring, faith always seems to play a role some-

Key Points

- Alfalfa is at the heart of a high-quality forage program.
- The quality of first-cutting alfalfa changes rapidly.
- The first cutting decreases about five points of RFV per day.

where along the way. Alfalfa is the heart of a high-quality forage program, especially for dairy and livestock farmers. Management of that first cutting will set the stage for the rest of the harvest season. It will dictate how many cuttings you get and when the last cutting will be harvested.

First-crop harvest of alfalfa is

different from succeeding harvested crops. With alfalfa under normal conditions, you can expect about 100 pounds of dry matter growth per acre, per day. However, this range can be anywhere from zero to 200 pounds per acre per day. Under normal growing conditions, a five-day delay in first-cut alfalfa harvest results in a gain of about 0.25 tons of dry matter per acre.

Highest yielder

The first cutting is generally the highest-yielding cutting of the year, as subsequent cuttings tend to be lower. Depending on the cutting system, the percentage of the total yield contributed by the

first cutting is between 30% and 40%, with the remaining cuttings adding 25% to 30%.

Of course, waiting for maximum yield has a trade-off in quality. As it nears maturity, first-crop alfalfa will decrease in quality quicker than other cuttings. Keep in mind, quality of the first cutting changes at the fastest rate, and later cuttings change in fiber at a slower rate. Research indicates that the first cutting decreases about five points of relative feed value per day, second cutting decreases two to three points per day and third and fourth cuttings during the growing season decline one to two points per day. The late-

fall growth may change little in forage quality during mid- to late September and early October.

Relative forage quality will change about the same as RFV on first cutting and then decline about three points per day on second, third and fourth cuttings during the growing season. If you consider that five-day delay again, you end up with a decline in RFV (or perhaps relative forage quality) of about 20 points.

So since it has been a long wait for the alfalfa harvest, take the management to heart. Of course, managing the weather will be the hardest part.

Clark is the Chippewa County Extension ag agent.

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