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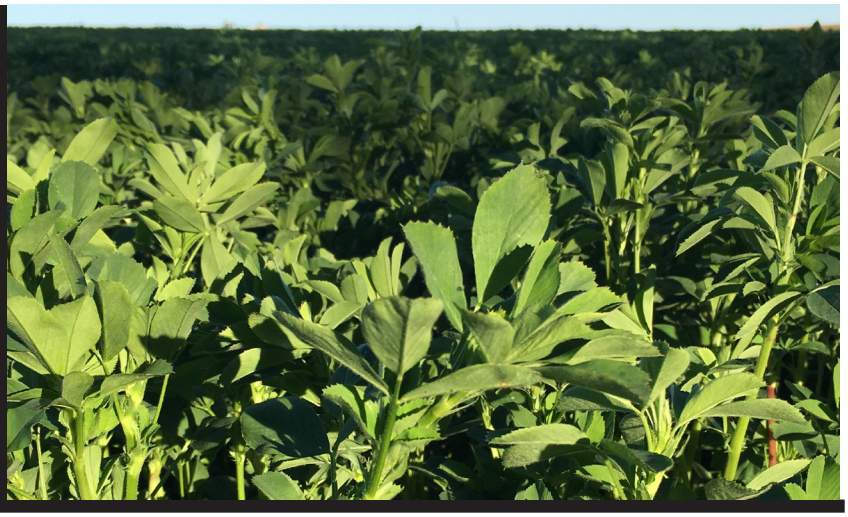
WINTERKILL... WHAT IS NEXT?

BY JAMES DOWNEY



Icy fields, rain events throughout the winter months, extremely cold temperatures, and a few freeze-thaw cycles. Sound like this past winter in Northeastern Wisconsin? It seemed to freeze early in mid-November, then freeze and thaw a few times until mid-December, amid a few rain events. We had a thaw in January with rain and then a cold February and early March. Mid-March brought freezing and thawing, and flooding which may have presented opportunities for the alfalfa to be killed as well. Alfalfa fields may be stressed due to this odd weather pattern. Here's to hoping the alfalfa has pulled through the winter just fine. In case it didn't, let's look at a few options.

According to an article from Field Crop News, the first order of business is to evaluate your alfalfa stands after green-up. Take time to walk your fields and assess damage. Look for leaves and buds that are growing. Dig up plants and analyze the internal color of the roots; white or cream colored roots should be healthy roots that will drive plant growth. Brown roots mean the plant is dead or dying.

Which stands are worth keeping if there are still some viable roots in the field? According to an Iowa State Extension Article, "Research would say that a 'keeper' field with no significant yield loss would be a first production year field with 12 or more healthy plants per square foot; second and third production year fields, six or more crowns per square foot; and older fields, four or more healthy plants per square foot. Or, stands of any age with 55 or more harvestable stems per square foot and healthy taproots." Many producers in Wisconsin work with custom harvesters to put away forage crops. Even if you harvest your own feed, harvesting feed from poor stands or low-yielding fields is quite expensive when the costs of running equipment, fuel, and labor are totaled.

Keep in mind that established alfalfa stands produce an autotoxin that will prevent new alfalfa from growing in the same field. You can direct seed alfalfa into poor/dead stands that were planted last year. Sometimes this works well, but other times established plants can outcompete the new seeding. Large bare spots in the field can be disced and seeded down. Grasses and clovers can also be no-tilled into the existing stand to help boost yields. If the alfalfa is established and poor/dead, it may be best to plant corn in that field to utilize the nitrogen credits and plant new seeding into another field.

If your field is too poor to keep in production or dead, it's time to make a decision on what to do next. According to an online research summary from UW-Extension, planting more silage, sorghum, sudangrass, forage soybeans, sorghum-sudangrass, millet, barley, oats and peas, and direct seeding alfalfa into another field are all options to consider in Wisconsin. Adding grass may be an option to increase digestibility and boost yields when seeding down new alfalfa fields as well. How soon do you need forage to feed your cows? Many producers in Northeast Wisconsin are currently very tight on forage inventory, so let's look at options to harvest forage to make up for a lost first crop.

If we can get into the fields early enough, consider double cropping oats and peas and then sorghum, sudangrass, or sorghum-sudangrass. Peas and oats can yield quality forage that brings in digestible energy and protein to the ration. Be prepared to harvest this crop at the late boot stage to maximize quality.

Warm-season annuals such as sorghum, sudangrass, or sorghum-sudangrass can yield very well in warm weather with

adequate moisture but from talking with producers, it seems to depend on the weather we have and the soil conditions that year. Be prepared to harvest these forages before they head to maximize quality. These forages bring fiber and length to the ration and BMR sorghum is highly digestible. Millet is and option as well but are not as widely planted in Wisconsin. These warm season annuals can be difficult to pack in a bunker to adequately ferment, but it can be done. As with many forages, they can also be wrapped as baleage.

Forage soybeans is a crop that is not common in Wisconsin but more research and trials are being conducted. It seems that a forage with high protein, adequate fiber, and energy from the oil can be harvested. However, there are some concerns with forage soybeans as this crop ferments poorly when harvested, and may produce free ammonia and butyric acid. Perhaps this could be a forage to feed to heifers or to intercrop with a warm season annual to increase the protein content of the forage and improve fermentation. An advantage of forage soybeans is that they can also be double cropped behind a spring cereal crop.

If we have sufficient forage on-hand to last through summer, can we plant more corn silage and feed more silage in the ration? Silage brings energy, in the form of digestible fiber and starch, to the diet, plus length in the TMR when chopped correctly. Silage can also yield the most dry matter per acre per year. One disadvantage of this is that we will have to wait until fall to harvest a crop.

Work with your on-farm team, your nutritionist, and your agronomist when evaluating options in case winterkill strikes. Maximizing feed quality while still harvesting high yields to build forage inventory will help you weather the storm.

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Dry Period Heat Stress Affects Cows' Granddaughters

New research from the University of Florida shows that it's not just the dry cows that are affected by dry period heat stress. Their daughters and granddaughters are, too. That's right, if your late-gestation dry cows experience heat stress, the negative effects will still be impacting your herd when their granddaughters calve.

Their research team used lactation records from nine summers of heat-stress research to determine if heat stress that occurs in utero affects the productivity of granddaughters in addition to daughters. The answer is an emphatic yes!

In the heat-stress trials, cows were dried off 46 days before calving. Cooled dry cows had shade, fans and soakers. Heat-stressed dry cows had shade only. Milk yield, fat and protein records for the dams, daughters and granddaughters were used to estimate energy corrected milk from calving to 35 weeks in milk for two consecutive lactations.

Dams subjected to heat stress during the dry period produced 5 lbs less milk per day than their cooled counterparts. When the heat-stressed cows' daughters calved two years later, they produced 8 lbs less milk per day than their cooled counterparts. In the daughters' second lactations, the difference between heat-stressed and cooled daughters was 7.5 lbs of milk per day.

Milk production losses continued when granddaughters entered the milking string. Granddaughters, born to daughters that were heat-stressed in utero, produced 8 lbs less milk per day than their cooled counterparts in their first lactation. In the granddaughters' second lactations milk losses climbed to 14 lbs per day.

It appears that heat stress while in utero prevents optimal growth and development of the mammary gland in daughters and granddaughters, which leads to less milk production than their cooled counterparts.