



Raising the Bar on First Cut Forages

The harvest window has opened in many areas of Ontario for first cut forages. In the south west, orchard grass has headed out a week ago, late orchard grass and brome are heading out now and timothy will not be far behind.

The alfalfa fields that I have scouted are in, or very close to being in the bud stage. By comparison to last year, yields are looking to be higher. Many producers would like to be harvesting, but the inclement weather and wet fields have delayed cutting.



Source: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/ag/plantdoc/bigpic.cfm?pid=12494>

As the alfalfa plants mature, the nutrient flow reverses to replenish the crown with carbohydrates. When the energy level in the crown is sufficient, new shoot growth is initiated. These new shoots are the beginning of the second cut. If these shoots are removed during first cutting, the process must start again, delaying second cut and reducing second cut yield.

By raising the cutting height to two inches or slightly more, this encourages re-growth from leaf axillary buds. The lower stem of the plant contains the more fibrous and less digestible material, so by raising the cutting height, the quality of the forage can be increased without sacrificing too much yield. If some lodging has occurred, raising the cutting height may not be possible.

In first year stands, first cut should be delayed until one tenth to one half bloom, or by inspecting the crown for re-growth shoots. This will ensure that energy reserves are sufficient in the root to sustain future growth and stand longevity.

Ron Piett, Feed Manager

