

Extension Responds: Flood

Harvesting Wet Alfalfa Fields

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Excessive rainfall over recent weeks delayed alfalfa harvest over much of the Midwest. Fields are saturated and many have standing water. Some fields were cut prior to or during this period. This material has remained in the field and is poor quality. In some cases, it is molding. Even standing alfalfa is “slimy” at the base and beginning to lodge.

Harvesting this material presents some special challenges. Cut forage that has been left in the field for more than one week, in most cases should simply be chopped and blown back onto the field, particularly if it is showing signs of molding. This is especially true if the forage is slimy. If material with any signs of mold is harvested for silage it should be stored separately such as in a bag, pile or as round bale silage. Wet, moldy, low quality material is likely to have fermentation problems should be handled separately. The use of additives to improve fermentation is not recommended in this case. The fermenting organisms (lactobacillus and others) need a good supply of fermentable carbohydrates and good storage conditions for growth. This poor quality material will likely not supply either and so will the use of additives will not be economical.

To reduce damage to standing fields when harvesting, make sure tire pressure is adjusted properly and drive on fields as little as possible. Cut older fields, those ready to be rotated out as silage fields, for this first cutting because wheel ruts will be less of a problem if the field is to be plowed down this year. Another option is to make baleage, which can be left in the field and picked up after the field dries out. If you make hay, consider round bales, which may be picked up when later when the soil has dried more. Recent research has shown an economic advantage to shorter alfalfa rotations so this may be an opportunity to take some older stands out of production after this year.

http://www.uwex.edu/ces/forage/wfc/proceedings2002/yield_stand.htm

Many fields have lodged due to excessive height and rainfall. Harvesting lodged fields may be difficult. In general, disc mowers are better than sickle mowers for harvesting lodged material. Special blades can be purchased which pick up downed material well, but the blades may pick up increased soil and other material if used in later cuttings when the soil is dry. In these wet conditions this problem will be minimal however.

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