

Grazing Alfalfa and the Fear of Bloat

With high hay costs there is a lot of interest in grazing alfalfa. Grazing, instead of making hay, is a good management decision for some alfalfa and/or livestock producers. It may be a very bad idea for others.

Grazing alfalfa is not new. Alfalfa has been grazed since before Roman times. It is grazed by cattle, sheep, hogs, horses, camels, goats, ostriches, and other domestic animals as well as deer and many other wild animals.

Pure stands of alfalfa are frequently grazed. More often, alfalfa is grown in mixtures with grasses for pasturing. In some areas alfalfa is green chopped or fed as fresh long stems.

Most producers are at least somewhat reluctant to graze their alfalfa because of the possibility of losing animals to bloat. While the possibility of bloat is real when grazing most lush forages, it is particularly troublesome when grazing nearly all forage legumes. No alfalfa variety is less apt to cause bloat than another.

Pasturing alfalfa during the late fall and winter is the safest grazing time when nearly all growth is frozen (brown). The most dangerous time for bloat is when recent growth has been frosted with spring or fall freezes.

Some of the most widely accepted ways to lessen the problems with bloat are:

- Provide a bloat preventative for several days before grazing alfalfa and continue to provide it the entire time that livestock are grazing alfalfa.
- Do not graze alfalfa that is lightly frosted. This is probably the most risky time. Graze alfalfa when nearly all growth is frozen (brown).
- Do not begin early in the morning. Do not turn cattle onto alfalfa wet with dew. Wait until it dries completely. Fewer problems occur when starting in the afternoon.
- Do not put hungry cattle on lush alfalfa. Fill animals with dry grass or hay before grazing alfalfa. Continue to give them a choice of eating dry feed or fairly mature grass when grazing alfalfa.
- Some producers use a "chronic bloater" in the herd as an indicator.
- Closely watch livestock several times a day, at first.
- Remove all animals from the alfalfa field at the first sign of bloat and watch them closely.

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