

Fall Pasture Fertility Management After A Drought

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Soil fertility plays a major role in fall pasture growth, the overwintering of the plants and the following spring's production. At this time of year that you can give a helping hand to a pasture that is ailing from either being overgrazed, stressed by poor growing conditions or a combination of both. It is even possible to revive the grazing season and get some extra production from a field this fall. Nitrogen is the key, but phosphorous and potash are important additions to getting pastures back into productivity.

Grass pastures -particularly those with a large percentage of fescues, will respond to nitrogen with good fall growth if moisture is available. Use 50 to 75 pounds of nitrogen per acre. A return of twenty to thirty pounds of dry matter per pound of nitrogen applied per acre is possible with tall fescue, orchardgrass, bromegrass, perennial ryegrasses and reed canarygrass. How large the response will be depends on how soon the nitrogen is applied, the current condition of the field, the amount of moisture available and when the killing frosts descend.

In addition to getting fresh fall feed you will get better weed control. Early fall nitrogen applications stimulate fall tillering in grasses. The result is a stronger sod with fewer bare spots, and fewer sites for weed establishment.

The benefits of a nitrogen application this fall don't stop with producing extra fall forage and improved weed control. Dr. Bob Sheard, when he was at the University of Guelph, also found that fall applications of nitrogen were important to get grasses to overwinter and grow quickly in the following spring. Grasses fertilized in the fall accumulate more nitrogenous food reserves which are used to support life in the winter and to start growth in the spring. An extra two weeks of productive pasture in the spring can be obtained from nitrogen applied from September to late October. If winter feed stocks are tight that extra two weeks is a major benefit!

The nitrogen you apply this fall will not affect the legume content in your pastures.

Phosphorous and potash applied in the fall will also pave the way for better pastures in a year after a drought. Surviving plants, particularly the legumes, will go into the winter in better shape and therefore have more chance of surviving the winter stresses. In addition, the nutrient status of the soil will be enhanced and this will help new forage plants establish next spring. Keep this in mind if you are planning to do any overseeding this fall or frost seeding this winter. The best way to determine phosphorous and potash requirements are with a soil test.

The fertility management you choose to follow this fall will have a major impact on the 1998 grazing season. Even if we have another dry year your pastures will be ready to provide as much feed as possible.