

FIVE CONSIDERATIONS AS PASTURES TRANSITION TO COLD, WET WEATHER

The fall season generates many questions for our team related to pasture and hay management. This time of year, thoughts frequently turn to maintaining present pasture conditions while managing for maximum forage yields and quality next spring. It makes sense to share a few best practices related to taking care of production fields as the weather turns colder and more inclement:



- **Depending on region, it may already be too late to over-seed or inter-seed into existing pastures.** Keep in mind any tillage (even light tillage) can lead to increased soil losses as winter approaches, especially on hilly or “HEL” ground. In areas where the calendar still allows for fall seeding, consider species that germinate quickly and have potential to withstand early winter conditions. Ryegrass or winter small grains may be a good option.
- **We promote thinking about fertility early and often, and for good reason.** Fall offers the best time to add needed fertility, especially for primary nutrients like Phosphorus and Potassium, along with Sulfur – all of which take longer to become available to the plant versus Nitrogen. Fertilizer added in fall not only replaces nutrients removed from forage harvest, but also helps maintain proper plant health through winter while enhancing growth potential next spring. While fertility is crucial, proper pH is even more so. Conditions this time of year are well suited for lime to be translocated into the soil – so your pastures can start utilizing it next spring. If not already done, we recommend having your soil tested and applying proper amendments accordingly.
- **It is also a good time to think about soil compaction and its effects of plant damage.** Pressure from animal traffic can cause significant compaction. Compaction leads to reductions in water infiltration and root vigor, which in turn increases likelihood for wind and water erosion. In efforts to maximize stockpiled forage, it is a common mistake to let livestock stay on pasture too long (especially as soils become overly saturated). Heavy animal traffic can easily damage forage plants by crushing crowns and negatively affecting root structure.
- **How late should livestock be allowed to graze?** The rule of thumb for grazing is “take half and leave half” and to not let pastures be grazed below 3-4 inches in height. Oregon State research shows that removing more than 50% of plant material will start negatively impacting root growth. Excessive grazing in wet and cold months makes pasture plants more susceptible to winter damage, while increasing the likelihood of disease.
- **When the time comes to augment your feeding system with round bales, remember the common causes of waste.** It’s always a good rule to feed bales that are stored outside before those stored inside, and always feed hay in areas of your pasture or paddock that are well drained.