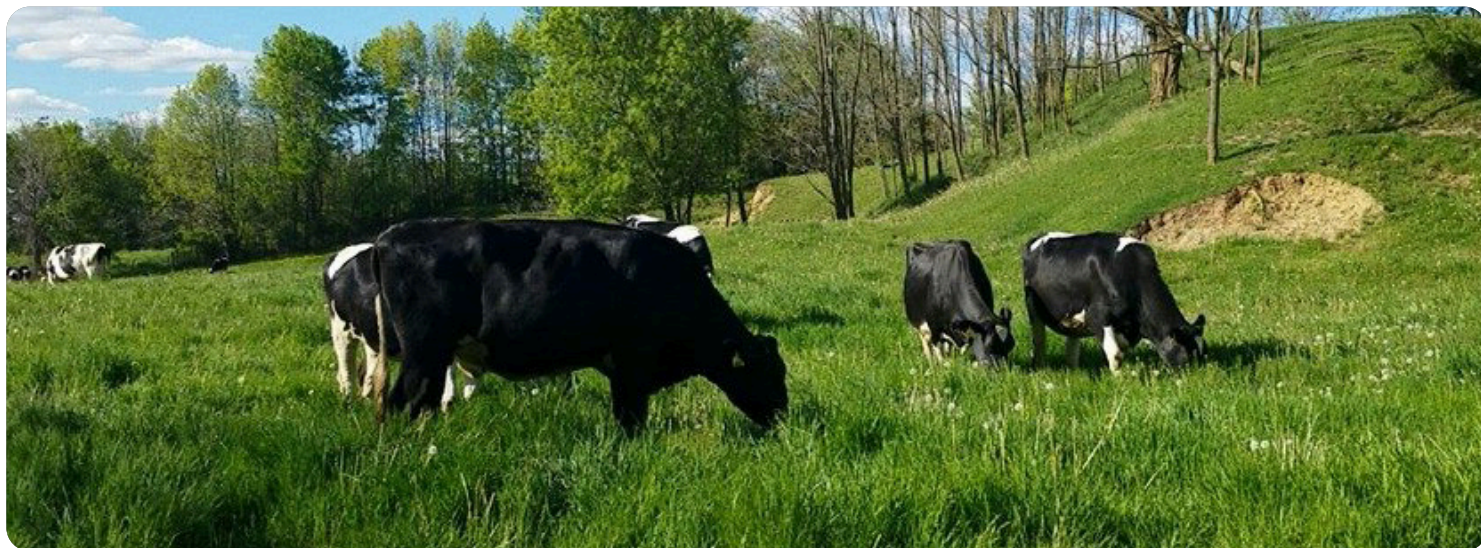


# TIPS FOR MANAGING SPRING FIELDS



For most of the Midwest, April is the ideal time for pasture and hay field seeding and renovation. Soil temperatures are climbing and everyone's hopeful Mother Nature will provide a large enough window to get equipment and machinery in the field. Areas that are most effected need attention now more than ever – such as hay feeding locales, wind-swept stretches and poorly drained spots.

This time of year is crucial for making important decisions about forage field management, with fertility being one of the most vital considerations. Spring soil testing plays a key role in ensuring hay and pasture success. Without understanding the fertility levels, developing an effective forage plan becomes nearly impossible. Soil tests are relatively inexpensive, and with soil temperatures rising, now is the ideal time to test, especially if the fields haven't been tested in the past 2-3 years.

## PASTURE MANAGEMENT TIPS

1. **If rotational grazing, start grazing as soon as possible.** When producers wait until the first paddock is in optimal condition, other paddocks may become unmanageable due to excessive growth.
2. **Go easy on spring nitrogen (N) applications.** Recognize that applying N to pastures is different than to hay fields. When managers are concerned with grass or forage getting away from them too quickly, early N applications can make the problem worse. Depending on the grazing system, holding off on N until later in the spring or even the fall might be a better option.
3. **Relocate livestock off of pasture when wet, muddy conditions become extended.** Allowing livestock to trample legume stands or fields with a large percentage of legumes can lead to irreversible crown damage.
4. **Consider transitioning the most productive areas into hay.** Turning those high yielding spots into hay production (either before or after the first grazing cycle) can minimize forage losses and increase utilization of the entire pasture.
5. **Clip pastures to help with weed control.** Our team gets asked several times each spring for recommendations on pasture weed control and/or herbicides. When both grass and legumes are present, options become more limited and more cultural and mechanical practices come into play.

## HAY FIELD MANAGEMENT TIPS

- 1. Complete a thorough evaluation of your stand to determine the best next steps.** Like most research universities suggest, we recommend you start by estimating ground cover percentage. The simple rule to follow is three-year-old bunch-type grasses and sod-forming grasses should have at least 50% ground cover. Anything less means the field needs to be renovated. For pure alfalfa stands, we recommend counting stems per square foot. You should count all stems that a mower would typically reach, as anything less than 40 indicates the stand should be replaced. Our complimentary alfalfa stand count rings are the perfect tool for this job!
- 2. Hay fields absolutely need nitrogen to maximize potential!** Adding nitrogen (N) improves yields and boosts protein levels. Depending on the region, most cool season grasses need somewhere between 30 - 40 lbs. of N per ton of expected yield. Fall applications of N and phosphorus still make sense, however spring provides a golden opportunity to get back on track.
- 3. The type of livestock being fed affects the frequency of hay harvests.** For most areas of the Midwest, maximum yield and stand persistence in both grass and legume stands occurs near full bloom and closer to 45-day intervals during the season. When the goal is higher quality, first cutting should take place at boot stage (for hay and bud stage for legumes). Expect successive cuttings to fall about one month apart.
- 4. If hay from a winter small grain is planned, understand the limitations.** Small grain hay crops offer the highest quality when harvested at the late-boot stage (around 15-20% moisture). This stage of cutting is also recommended when harvesting small grains with rough or jagged awns, as these "beards" can cause irritation to the eyes, mouth, and tongue of livestock. However, extending the harvest until early milk stage offers the best compromise between high quality and dry matter tonnage.

REFERENCES: Cornell University, Purdue University, Iowa State University

