



We typically preach that you should evaluate stands soon after they come out of dormancy. In years like this when it is raining all the time and tornado warnings are all too common, maybe you had other things to do besides rate your stands. The good news is that stands can be evaluated at any time of year. After first cutting when the regrowth is about 6 inches tall or more is a good time to evaluate stands because if you detect a problem, you will have time to act to correct the problem.

The rules are still the same no matter when you evaluate stands. Work done at the University of Wisconsin and endorsed by universities all across the country suggests that rather than doing plant counts like we used to do, the better way to assess alfalfa stands is by counting stems. The table shows stem counts per square foot required to maintain top production in your alfalfa field.

<u>Stems/ square foot</u>	<u>effect on yield</u>	<u>action</u>
55+	yield is not limited	none
40-55	some reduction likely	watch for further decline
39 or less grass	noticeable yield reduction	renovate stand or interseed with

If you count more than 55 stems per square foot, you are in great shape! If you count between 40 and 55, put that field on a watch list and start thinking about what you might do with that field in a year or two because it is starting to decline. If you count 39 stems or less, you need to act. Depending on your whole farm plan and the time of year when you notice the decline, you have several options. If you do stem counts after first cutting and notice they are low, it may not be the best time to interseed grasses. Some readers in the upper Midwest could possibly interseed grass but for the majority of producers cool season grasses would have to be put in later in the summer. Your best choices will be warm season annuals. Here are a few options to think about:

OPTION 1 - For dry hay, plant about 10-12 pounds per acre of AS 9301, our new BMR 6 dry-stalk Sudan grass. Planting at this low rate will not completely shade out alfalfa so you will still have a thin stand going into fall that you can interseed cool season grass into. Make sure your soil temperatures are high enough (60 degrees and rising). If you were lucky enough to find a harvest window in early May for first cutting, your soil may be too cool after first cutting so you may have to wait until the second cutting comes off.

OPTION 2 - Another dry hay option if you have a no till drill that will handle small seed and good press wheels, is teff. Remember the rules of teff – firm seedbed and shallow planting



depth! Also keep in mind with teff you will be cutting every 21 days or less, which will really be tough on your alfalfa plants, so don't count on having much of an alfalfa stand going into the fall.

OPTION 3 - If you really need significant tonnage and only want one harvest, consider AF 7401, the dwarf forage sorghum in the southern half of the Midwest. Compared to Sudan grass, forage sorghum is a slower starter and it won't like competition as well. The most effective way we found to plant AF 7401 is to let the alfalfa come back and get about a foot of regrowth and then spray it out and plant the AF 7401. Tonnage and quality will be outstanding and the sprayed alfalfa will give you some Nitrogen credits to grow the sorghum crop.

OPTION 4 – Plant Master Graze corn. We have another article about Master Graze in this newsletter and one time to introduce this crop is after first crop alfalfa. You will need to control the alfalfa first by spraying or plowing. If you are short of corn silage or did not get all your corn planted because of this wet spring we are having, Master Graze gives you an opportunity to get 4-5 tons of dry matter in around 60 days. You will then have time to sow another forage crop in late summer following Master Graze. Remember that this is a corn plant and needs to be treated like one. Make sure the soil temperature is 60 degrees for Master Graze as well.

With each of the 4 options above, there are some common things to remember:

Soil temperature needs to be 60 degrees and rising. If the soil temperature is too low, wait until just after second cutting to plant.

A thin stand of alfalfa and a thin alfalfa stand full of weeds or grass are not the same thing. If you have a lot of invasive grasses or weeds in your stand, you will need to control them to get the best results of the 4 options above. (NOTE: if you have planted a mixture of alfalfa and high quality late maturing grasses, thinning alfalfa is not that big an issue. Grasses like orchardgrass and fescue will give tonnage and are at least as high quality as the alfalfa).

These options get you through the summer and produce high quality forage. However, when fall comes, you will have to either renovate the stand or add something like cool season grasses to keep production high.