



Managing Grasses: It Ain't Rocket Science by Ev Thomas, Oakpoint Consulting

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Managing grasses isn't difficult, but there are no shortcuts if you want to produce "cow quality" forage. Following are three keys to good yields and high quality:

Apply N fertilizer at green-up — Fertilizer production is an energy intensive process, and with much lower oil prices the prices of N fertilizer have been on a decline since last fall. Recent prices of UAN and urea were 12 and 18% lower respectively vs. a year ago. Even with low milk prices don't skimp on nitrogen: Apply 70-90 lbs of UAN or 200 lbs of urea per acre. Ammonium sulfate is another good option and can be blended with either UAN or urea. My preference is for UAN or a urea ammonium sulfate blend because these products supply N in both ammonium and nitrate forms. Whichever you use, the key is to apply nitrogen at green-up: This means at the first signs of spring growth, not when your spouse starts to nag you about mowing the lawn. With a good stand of grass—not a worn-out alfalfa-grass stand—timely N application can double yields and increase % crude protein by half.

Mow at the mid to late boot stage — "When you see the head the quality is dead." Headed grasses are OK for some non-lactating animals but you need to be aggressive with harvest management if you want high quality forage. This is the case regardless of the grass species. Depending on the acreage to be harvested, you may need to start in the mid-boot stage to be able to harvest all the grass intended for lactating cows. While this will modestly decrease yield, sometimes you need to trade quantity for quality. You'll also discover that the grass regrows faster when it's harvested when the soil is still cool and moist. (That's why they're called "cool season" grasses!)

Mow at 4" stubble height and spread windrows — Grasses need plenty of stubble for regrowth because unlike alfalfa the nutrients for the next crop are in the bottom of the stems. Stretch those windrows out as far as your mower will allow, and if possible chop the same day you mow. 35% DM is ideal for most silos but I'd rather see grass chopped at 30% DM the day it's mowed vs. leaving it overnight and then chopping the next day at 35% DM. If you chop at 30% DM, slightly shortening chop length can reduce silage effluent. I get really nervous when chopped grass forage approaches 40% DM, especially for bunker silos and drive-over piles. Trying to pack 40% DM grass is like packing a stack of mattresses. — Ev Thomas