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By Laura Skillman

Recovering from the Freeze and Drought of 2007

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. (Nov. 14, 2007) — Farmers are not likely to soon forget the past year. A double punch of a late spring freeze and a summer drought has left pasture and hay fields gasping. Now that some rain is again falling, producers may be wondering how well their fields will recover and if they can make changes to better prepare for future weather problems.

“There are no easy answers for recovery,” said Ray Smith, Extension forage specialist with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture. “There’s no miracle cures. Good, sound forage management is really what is needed.”

Some plant species will recover more easily than others. Alfalfa stands that were cut after the spring freeze, and the dead top growth removed, recovered better than those that weren’t cut, he said. Some winterkill did occur because of the freeze and, in a few cases where the alfalfa fields had been cut or heavily grazed in the fall, substantial winterkill was noted.

“The freeze reinforced the university’s recommendation to not cut or graze alfalfa between the middle of September and early November,” Smith said. “You want to let it replace its root reserves.”

Smith said they have also noticed some drought damage in orchardgrass stands resulting in thinning of the stands. These stands will need to be interseeded with some clover or additional orchardgrass early next spring, he said.

Some sound forage management techniques for today and everyday include using lime and fertilizer as called for by soil-testing fields. It is very important to maintain phosphorus and potassium for legumes as well as some grasses such as orchardgrass to give them winter hardiness and disease tolerance, he said. Light fall nitrogen applications can also be very helpful to allow grasses such as bluegrass and fescue to thicken and improve their spring productivity.

In a good management program, it is also important to use what is available such as grazing harvested cornfields, Smith said. It is important though to remove cattle from the fields when a frost is anticipated if Johnsongrass is present. Johnsongrass will emit

prussic acid after a frost, which can be deadly to livestock. Cattle can return to the field a couple weeks after the frost. After a hard freeze, the grass is safe to graze after a few days.

Another important point to remember is weeds have done quite well this summer, and weed control is important. November is a good time to control many winter annual weeds.

“If you are going to plant clover, then use a fall application to knock back weeds, frost-seed clover in February and remember to avoid herbicides that persist in the soil over winter,” he said. “Once you’ve planted the clover you can’t put down an herbicide or you will kill the clover.”

Getting early growth this spring will be important to many forage producers this year, especially those who have very limited hay supply for their livestock. An early application of low rates of nitrogen this spring will encourage growth in these fields.

“Putting a low rate, 30 to 60 pounds per acre, of nitrogen on as soon as the grass begins to green up will give you a couple of weeks earlier potential for grazing,” he said. “If you are going to be cutting a hay crop from the field, then a higher rate of nitrogen would be used.”

In renovating and reseeding pastures, remember to have the fields grazed down or mowed for better seed to soil contact and less competition for new seedlings. Smith also encourages farmers to go ahead and line up what seed they will need now, because seed production problems and a likely high demand will mean tight supplies on some species like orchardgrass. Getting the seed lined up now will ensure that farmers have the seed they need to sow midwinter or spring.

As farmers work to recover from this year’s weather damages, they need to remember that other weather problems likely are looming in the future.

Smith advises farmers to be prepared for the next drought with a grazing management plan appropriate to their individual farm operation.

“It’s been a tough year,” he said, “but hopefully we’ve learned a few things to help us in the future.”

For more freeze, drought and general forage information, visit the UK forages Web site at <http://www.uky.edu/ag/forage>.

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