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Cooperative Extension

Cutting Alfalfa Very Frequently

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There has been some interest in cutting alfalfa frequently to get very low fiber for dairy rations. We had a study in 2000 and 2001 where we compared 20 alfalfa varieties with and without wheel traffic. We cut at 21-day and at 35-day intervals. The yield data averaged across the varieties is presented in the table below. In the seeding year we saw 33 to 51% yield reductions and, in the first production year, about 50% yield reductions.

The study was not continued beyond the first production year because the 21-day alfalfa varieties with 21-day cutting interval died out the next winter while the same varieties with 35-day cutting intervals came through the winter in good shape.

There did not appear to be any significant differences among the varieties in tolerance of the more frequent cutting.

Thus, as farmers are thinking of the shorter cutting intervals to reduce fiber content of the forage, we should keep the 50% yield reductions and expected shorter stand life in mind. It is difficult to believe that the economics of this practice will be beneficial to the farmer.

Effect of Cutting Frequency on Alfalfa Yield, Arlington, WI				
Management	Seeding year		First Production Year	
	21 day cutting interval	35 day cutting interval	21 day cutting interval	35 day cutting interval
	-----Yield (t/a dry matter)-----			
No traffic	2.9	4.3	3.9	7.3
Reduction (21 vs 35 days)	33%		47%	
With wheel traffic	1.8	3.7	3.2	6.6
Reduction (21 vs 35 days)	51%		52%	