

Heaving In Alfalfa Fields

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Heaving is likely to be a problem in some alfalfa stands in eastern Wisconsin this spring.

Heaving occurs on heavy soils that have high moisture contents. Repeated freezing and thawing causes expansion and contraction as

ice is formed and thawed that pushes the taprooted plants out of the soil.

Where heaving is observed, first dig a few plants to determine if the taproot is broken. Plants with broken taproots will likely green up and survive for varying lengths of time. The length of time before plant death will depend on the

length of taproot above the break and will range from greenup only to sufficient growth harvesting first crop.

Fields with heaving one-inch or less are likely to have unbroken taproots and may be salvageable for at least the current year. They will likely green up later than normal. The best recommendation is to leave stands alone and harvest late (50 percent bloom) being sure to raise cutter bar sufficiently to clear crowns. Do not go over the field with a roller or cultipacker in early spring to push the crowns back into the soil. This will likely to do more damage than good.

Natural settling should occur during the year and if plants are reseated stands should survive until next year. Stands entering the winter with elevated crowns are

likely to suffer above average winterkill.

Heaving in future years can be minimized by having good internal and surface drainage. Tiling may reduce heaving problems, depending on the depth of the tile. Residue on the surface over winter will reduce heaving because it insulates the soil and reduces the amount of freezing and thawing. This means that fields not harvested last fall will have less heaving than those with fall growth removed.

Planting a grass with the alfalfa has not been shown to reduce heaving of the alfalfa in the stand.

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