Better Cattle Management Needed When Fertilization Cut

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Because of the skyrocketing cost of fertilizer this spring, many Arkansas cattle producers are cutting back on fertilizer rates on pastures and hayfields.

"Producers need to evaluate their pasture stocking rate if they drastically cut back on fertilizer application," advises Dr. John Jennings, extension forage specialist for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

Producers who normally apply little if any fertilizer to pastures may see little effect, he said, but those producers who have found fertilization necessary to maintain enough forage for their herds need to improve grazing management to avoid severe pasture shortages and long-term damage from overgrazing.

"Now is the time to reduce herd size while grass is still available so pastures will remain in good condition later into the grazing season," Jennings said. "Any animals that need to be culled can be removed now before forage becomes limiting."

Jennings said many producers have opted to not fertilize pastures and plan to just graze what grows.

"That strategy will work only if growing conditions remain ideal through summer," he said.

If too many animals remain on slower-growing unfertilized pastures for too long, he said, the result will be overgrazed pastures that will take a long time to recover. That will reduce carrying capacity of the farm even further. In addition, animal performance will be reduced, resulting in lower income.

Rotational grazing can help increase forage usage and will extend the grazing days per acre, which can be very important in case of drought or other weather related problems, according to Jennings.

Rotational grazing does not need to be complicated, he said. If a farm has four or more pastures, just shutting gates and moving animals once or twice a week will provide a lot of benefit.

Adding legumes such as clover or vetch will replace some of the nitrogen that was not applied as fertilizer. Fall is the next planting window for legumes, but soil samples should be taken now to identify fields with adequate fertility to support clover growth.

For more information on grazing and forage management, contact your county extension office or visit www.uaex.edu and select Agriculture, then Beef and Feed and Forage Publications. Δ