

Jump Start Grazing When Winter Hay Runs Short

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

When winter hay runs short, cattle producers have several options, including jump-starting spring pasture growth, said Dr. John Jennings, professor-forages, for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

"I don't know if I have enough hay to last until spring' was the most prevalent comment in most conversations at a recent livestock conference," Jennings said. "With all the hay harvested last year, I would not have believed we would be seeing the forage shortages that are beginning to develop across the state due to the very cold winter."

Cattle producers have a couple of options: Buy more hay or jump-start spring pastures by fertilization or overseeding with legumes.

For option one, cattle producers can visit <http://hayproducers.uaex.edu>, a University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture site where hay producers list what they have for sale.

Fields that have been grazed very short provide a good opportunity to overseed with red or white clover or lespedeza to improve forage quality, Jennings said.

"Once a good stand of clover is established, the recycling of the nitrogen fixed by the bacteria living in the clover root nodules will help support grass production later in the season or for the following year," he said. "Good grazing management will not only improve clover survival, but will also help distribute the nitrogen in the clover top growth."

Clover or lespedeza can be overseeded through March, but earlier is better than later. Pulling a field harrow, light disk, or even a bushy cedar tree over the field before or during broadcast planting can improve seed to soil contact for better establishment.

Early fertilization is another tactic. Producers should test the soil to determine how much nitrogen to apply.

In general, pasture fertilization rates include 50-60 pounds of nitrogen per acre. At least 40 pounds of nitrogen are required to produce one ton of dry forage.

Grazing control will also improve spring pastures.

"Once we get a few warmer days, grass will begin to grow and cows will devour any new green tip of grass available," Jennings said. "The grass requires leaf area to capture sunlight to fuel more growth. Allowing livestock to continually graze the new grass shoots will delay significant spring growth.

"If you have pastures divided for rotational

grazing, hold some paddocks out of the rotation to allow the grass to get a head start before grazing," he said. "If you have more than one or two pastures, but no planned grazing program, just close some gates to let the grass get started."

Another tactic to stretch short hay supplies or limited pasture growth is limit grazing.

Arkansas research has shown that limit grazing cows two days a week on wheat/rye/rye-grass mixed pasture with hay feeding the remainder of the week gave cow performance equal to those fed a balanced ration. This was done with a fraction of an acre of high quality pasture per cow.

"On one Arkansas Beef Improvement Program pasture project, a producer strip-grazed wheat for a day, fed half a bale of hay the second day with the remainder of the wheat strip, then



Calves enjoyed spring grazing on wheat last year at a farm in Izard County.

University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture photo by John Jennings.

moved to a new strip the third day," Jennings said. "By repeating this strategy, he was able to stretch 15 acres of wheat and limited hay for 55 cows through February and March until spring pasture growth was adequate.

"A little creativity can make a big difference," he said.

For more information about forage plans or beef cattle production in general, visit www.uaex.edu, download "Winter Annual Grasses for Grazing Livestock in Arkansas - FSA3066", www.uaex.edu/Other_Areas/publications/PDF/FSA-3066.pdf, or http://www.uaex.edu/Other_Areas/publications/PDF/MP184/MP-184.asp, "Beef Cattle Production", or www.aragriculture.org/forage_pasture/Management_Guides/Forages_Self_Help_Guide1.htm "Self-Study Guide 1: Developing an Overall Forage Plan." Δ