Make Plans Now For Fall And Winter Pastures

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'Tis the season to start planning for fall and winter pastures. Really? Even though this is the middle of summer hay harvest, hay feeding season will arrive before you know it. Economically, the later hay feeding season begins, the better. Hay production costs are around $25 per bale (4x5 round bale). So when you are harvesting hay, make sure the forage quality of the hay is worthy of that expense. Every day of hay feeding costs about $1.20 to $1.50 per cow. Grazing stockpiled forage during fall and winter is much less expensive.

Arkansas producers using stockpiled forages saved an average of $20/animal unit compared to feeding hay in demonstrations including over 100 farms. Bermudagrass and bahiagrass can be stockpiled for grazing from October into December, and fescue can be stockpiled for grazing from December through February. Forage quality of stockpiled bermudagrass pasture can be 15 to 20 percent crude protein in October and November, even after frost. Stockpiled fescue can be over 20 percent crude protein in December.

At this point, you might be thinking, "This is summer, so why worry about fall and winter pastures now?" Well, the simple answer is that pasture plans need to be made the season before that grass will be growing, or maybe earlier. Plans need to be made by August 1 to get the pastures in the right condition and practices in place to help ensure good fall forage growth.

The steps for growing a good stockpiled pasture are simple but important. For stockpiling bermudagrass or bahiagrass, clip or graze the pasture to a 2- to 3-inch height in early August and then apply 50 to 60 pounds N per acre. Let the forage grow until mid- or late October before grazing. Waiting until September to apply fertilizer can reduce potential forage yield by 60 to 80 percent, so don't delay fertilizer application.

For stockpiling fescue, clip or graze the pasture to a 3- to 4-inch height by September 1 and apply 50 to 60 pounds N per acre in early September. Let the forage grow until December before grazing. Waiting until October to fertilize for stockpiled fescue can dramatically reduce yield potential. In one trial, October-fertilized fescue produced the same yield as the unfertilized check treatment. Typical stockpiled forage yields average about 2,000 pounds dry matter per acre but ranges from 1,200 pounds to over 6,000 pounds and varies by the amount of rainfall.

Brushhogging pastures intended for stockpiling is okay if the grass is mowed short enough. Typically, the stubble after brushhogging is left 6 to 8 inches tall, and much of the old summer forage residue is left standing. New stockpiled growth comes up around this old stubble, but in many demonstrations, cattle refused the stockpiled forage below the top of the old forage. So if you brushhog a pasture to 6 inches, the cattle won't graze closer than 6 inches when you turn them into the stockpiled pasture.

Fertilizer is key to making stockpiling work for two reasons. The primary reason is for forage yield. Unfertilized fields seldom produce good fall yield. The secondary reason is forage quality. We conducted a demonstration at the Livestock and Forestry Branch station at Batesville to compare fertilized vs. unfertilized stockpiled forage. One fescue field had abundant summer growth and was left as is. Another fescue field was grazed off in late August then fertilized in September to encourage high-quality fall forage growth. In January, forage tests revealed that the unfertilized fescue was 7.9 percent CP and 56 percent TDN, while the fertilized fescue was 11 percent CP and 66 percent TDN. The lower-quality field would have been adequate for dry mature cows but not for the fall-calving cows we had in the demonstration project.

Applying fertilizer in hot weather is not as risky as many people believe. Ammonium nitrate fertilizer does not volatilize, so there are no losses when applied under most conditions of late summer. Urea fertilizer can volatilize when surface applied to summer pasture, but the total N loss is much less than you might expect. Many studies show virtually no difference between N sources for bermudagrass yield when the fertilizer was applied within a few days before rainfall. Even when losses are measured, the total yield difference is often less than 20 percent compared to ammonium nitrate.

So while you are sweating in the hay field this summer, think about how you can graze stockpiled pasture in the winter and feed less hay. If you need less hay, you can bale it earlier so it will be higher quality and cows will not need supplemental feed. Δ

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