Managing Pastures During Dry Weather

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Livestock producers should take aggressive steps in managing their pastures to make the most of what's left of the growing season, said John Jennings, professor-forages with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

"Management decisions should be made quickly during drought to maintain enough forage to feed the herd," he said. "Producers who plan ahead get themselves into a position to take advantage of better growing conditions when those conditions eventually arrive."

While the hot, dry conditions remain, Jennings recommends:

• Protect any remaining standing forage. "Standing grass may wither in the heat but still contains vital nutrients," he said. "Manage it like standing hay and feed it a few acres at a time to make it last as long as possible." A temporary or permanent electric fence makes this task much easier, and a solar fence energizer and single strand of temporary electric wire can be installed in a matter of minutes to subdivide pastures as needed.

• Rotational grazing. "Rotational grazing helps maintain forage growth longer into a drought period than continuous grazing," Jennings said. "Overgrazing weakens plants, causing them to develop shortened root systems." Plants stunted by drought and overgrazing respond more slowly to rain and fertilizer than do healthier plants. Rotating pastures during drought conditions can help protect the pastures that will be needed for fall production.

• Manage grazing pressure carefully. "Although all forages produce lower yield when drought occurs, some species, including bermudagrass and KY-31 tall fescue, can tolerate heavy grazing pressure and still persist while others are eliminated from the stand," he said. "Manage grazing pressure carefully during prolonged dry weather to prevent loss of high quality forage species such as novel endophyte fescue, clover and orchardgrass."

• Feed hay and limit grazing during dry summer weather can stretch available forage on drought-stressed pastures.

Jennings said September is a good time to think ahead toward managing for fall and winter growth and use.

"Fall growth of bermudagrass, bahiagrass or fescue can be stockpiled for grazing during the fall and winter, which can reduce the amount of hay needed for winter," he said.

Fescue pastures should be fertilized in early September and allowed to accumulate growth through November and can be grazed through the winter.

Yields of fertilized stockpiled forages can range from 1,500 pounds per acre in a very dry year up to 6,000 pounds per acre in good years. Crude protein levels commonly run above 15 percent and total digestible nutrient levels are around 65 percent or higher.

"Fertilizer applications during late summer have paid off in more than 100 on-farm demonstrations over the past decade," Jennings said.

Another option includes salvaging drought-stressed soybeans, grain sorghum, or corn for forage.

"It's important to note what pesticides may have been applied to the crop before use because some herbicides or insecticide labels prohibit use of treated crops for livestock forage," he said, adding, "Drought stress can cause accumulation of nitrate in some grain crops.

"If any doubt exists about the safety of the crop, a sample can be tested for nitrate content before harvest," Jennings said.

Other tactics include:

Overseeding winter annuals and clover into thin pastures in fall. Winter annuals can reduce the amount of hay needed and also reduces winter weeds. Clover can improve forage quality and fix nitrogen.

Applying herbicides during fall or in Feburary or March to reduce weed problems – which are more likely in overgrazed and otherwise stressed pastures.

Managing pasture is less expensive than feeding hay, but if your hay crop is short and you need hay, check online at http://hayproducers.uaex.edu/. Δ