

Prepping Pastures For Next Year

BLUE SPRINGS, MO.

A farmer's most economical forage harvesters are livestock, says a University of Missouri Extension agronomist.

"They don't need diesel and they drive themselves," said Pat Miller, agronomy specialist in Vernon County.

She recommends that producers start planning now to increase their forage for next year. Low-fertility fields are more likely to have stands reduced following a drought, so Miller suggests taking a soil test once there has been enough rain to allow the soil to be probed.

"A good test consists of 20 to 30 6-inch cores taken from the field and mixed together," she said. For more information, see the MU Extension guide "Soil Sampling Hayfields and Row Crops" (G9217), available for free download at www.extension.missouri.edu/G9217.

"Many pastures receive only nitrogen fertilizer annually and, over time, phosphate and potash levels go down," she added.

Because of the effects of drought and heat on forages, stands may need to be overseeded with grasses or legumes once there is enough moisture to allow the newly seeded plants to root deeply.

Legumes can be "frost seeded" by mixing the seeds with a winter fertilizer application. "The freezing and thawing of the soil will work the legume seed into the ground," she said.

Another way to plant the grass and legume seed is to drill the seed next spring. Many soil and water conservation districts have drills available for rent.

If brushy weeds have taken over the field and herbicide use is warranted, you may need to delay seeding for several years.

"Be sure to check herbicide labels for planting restrictions," Miller said. "Some may restrict legume planting for over a year or until a field bioassay is done." Bioassays involve taking some of the treated soil and planting seeds in it to see how they grow.



Drought-stressed fescue.

Credit: University of Missouri Extension

Rotational grazing will stretch short forage supplies. Using fences to divide pastures into smaller paddocks will increase utilization of forage supplies by reducing forage waste due to trampling and selective grazing.

"If allowed to pick and choose, livestock will keep going back to the new regrowth and avoid areas with mature growth," she said. Rotational grazing will also help distribute manure more evenly across the pastures, reducing fertilizer needs. Δ