

Time To Consider Your Spring And Summer Pastures Is Now



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Last year was atypical; volumes of rain in the spring followed by a severe drought for most of southern Illinois. However, now is not the time to look back. With spring approaching quickly, it is time to think about pastures and pasture management. Now may be the best time to consider improving both forage yields and animal performance on low producing grass pastures.

Pasture soils in Illinois tend to be low in fertility and undermanaged. The dominant plant species are often tall fescue, white clover and weeds. In addition, the high cost of fertilizers and soil amendments in recent years generally has meant that grazed forage cropland has received little or improper amounts of inputs to maintain productive stands. Thus the result of this combination of conditions is usually low yields of low quality forages.

The lack of rain last summer left many pastures in an overgrazed state. The extent to which pastures are overgrazed or mismanaged will directly correlate to the vigor and production of stands this spring.

However, never let an opportunity go to waste. Overgrazed pastures represent an excellent opportunity to frost seed legumes or grasses. Frost seeding involves broadcasting certain legume and cool-season grass seeds in February and March. At this time of year, the soil surface is honey-combed with openings created by daily temperature fluctuations. During nightly freezing and daily thawing, seeds are pulled deep into the soil through these openings.

Though conventional seeding practices usually have higher rates of success, frost seeding is still worth considering, especially if your pasture is badly damaged or terribly over-grazed from the last growing season. Over-grazed or damaged pastures already have areas of bare soil which means better seed to soil contact for the broadcast seeds and a greater opportunity

for success. Frost seeding is also less expensive than conventional practices and, if timed right and properly managed, can be an effective way to meet your pasture renovation goals.

If you do decide to try frost seeding, here are a few tips to improve your success. 1) Select your seed carefully. Use improved (inoculated) clover and cool-season grass seed; the plants will be more vigorous, hardier and have longer life spans. Cool-season grasses vary in their ability to compete with frost-seeded legumes like clovers. Of the cool-season grasses, perennial ryegrass and orchard grass demonstrate the highest success rates using this technique. 2) If you use a broadcast seeder, make sure to broadcast legume and grass seeds separately. Attempts to broadcast both seeds types together will result in poor seed dispersal due to differences in the sizes and densities of the seed. If possible, broadcast on shallow snow. The white background makes it easier to see the seed! A thick snow layer may displace seeds when it melts causing poor seed success. 3) Carefully manage the renovated pasture during the first year. If you have obtained a soil test and didn't apply the recommended plant nutrients in the fall, apply those nutrients in late April or early May. Omit the nitrogen component because the newly introduced legumes will provide a significant amount of nitrogen.

There are many reasons to frost seed a pasture. However, the most common reason is to increase forage production and forage quality. Improved pasture, results in increased livestock carrying capacity and increased live weight gain per acre which is a win-win situation because it decreases production costs and increases animal performance, which should result in increased income and more money in your pocket. Additionally, including legumes in a fescue pasture can reduce or eliminate the toxic effects of endophyte-infected tall fescue without the expenses of pasture renovation to dilute the endophyte. Happy grazing! Δ

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