

FORAGE

Springtime Is Pasture and Range “Go Time”

by James Rogers / jkrogers@noble.org



Springtime in pasture and range management is “go time.” As I start thinking about spring, here are some of the planning thoughts filling my head.

Soil sampling

As temperatures warm, it is a good time to get out and push a soil probe in the ground and pull samples – especially if you have not done so in the past three years. Fertilizer costs in 2011 are on the rise, and one of the easiest ways to save a dollar is fertilizing according to soil test results.

Annual ryegrass

March is “go time” for the growth of annual ryegrass. Quality will be high and provide the cow herd with a good boost of nutrition coming out of winter. A lot of our annual ryegrass pasture has been overseeded into bermudagrass, which is a great way to extend grazing days. However, ryegrass can be difficult to manage if it gets too far ahead of you. Ryegrass can shade the bermudagrass and delay its spring green-up, which can hurt summer bermudagrass production. Manage additional ryegrass produc-

tion by putting extra grazing pressure on it or removing it as hay if the yield is there. Annual ryegrass makes excellent hay if you can cut it in the boot to early head stage and can get it cured.

Tall fescue

Springtime is “go time” for tall fescue. It will follow a very similar growth pattern as annual ryegrass. It will begin rapid growth in March, which accelerates into April, then begins to slow down in May. Tall fescue can produce a lot of high quality forage during this time period, but care must be exercised to not hammer it too hard prior to the first of June. It is a good idea to leave tall fescue with 4-6 inch height by June 15, especially along or west of the Interstate 35 corridor, in order to give it a good chance of surviving summer’s heat and dry weather.

Weed management

Springtime is also “go time” for weeds. Begin weed scouting in March and target herbicide treatment of annual weeds when they reach an average height of 4 inches. Identify the weeds you are trying to kill, use the right chemical and the right rate. The best deterrent to weeds is maintaining a good grass canopy.

Grazing management

With the rapid flush of forage growth in the spring, it is often difficult to imagine running short on grass later in the year – but it happens. Review your stocking rates and your forage fertility program. If you plan on not fertilizing as much as in years past, you also need to consider that you will not be growing as much forage either. Concentrate rotations on cool-season forages first because their utilization period will be approaching its end by the first of June. Move onto the warm-season grasses as they become available. If you have grass getting ahead of you, turn the excess growth into hay or use it for summer stockpile.

Insect management

If you have alfalfa, springtime is “go time” for the alfalfa weevil. As a general rule, the weevils are active by Easter. Begin scouting if alfalfa is actively growing prior to that date. If alfalfa weevil pressure is high, they can significantly reduce first cutting yield. Another springtime insect to watch for is the aphid. It is common on winter pasture and alfalfa. Aphids can give the forage a drought-stressed appearance. Fortunately, if economic thresholds are reached, these insects are fairly easy to control. ▶

Crabgrass

Springtime is crabgrass establishment time. It works well following cereal rye graze-out. Seeding 3-5 lbs PLS into a firm seedbed from mid-April to the first of May will initiate crabgrass production 45-60 days after establishment. Production can be driven by 50-100 lbs/acre of actual N. Crabgrass quality is very high and makes excellent stocker forage or hay.

Silver bullets

Springtime is also when we get hit with all the “latest greatest” chemicals, fertilizer and seed. Make sure that the hype is backed by replicated research. If they don’t have the research – be very leery.

Springtime is a period of rapid change in pasture and range. Spring management decisions will impact pasture and range quality throughout the remainder of the year. ■