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FORAGE

Winter Pasture Options Following Summer Drought

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The drought conditions during 2011 have left forage resources for this year's fall and winter in short supply for most producers. Over the last couple of months, calves have been early weaned (and most marketed) and cattle herds have been culled heavily, relocated to pasture or completely dispersed. Many producers in Oklahoma and Texas who still have cattle are looking to the states north and east to fill hay needs, not only for this winter, but for this fall as well. Supplementation and feeding programs are being planned and implemented to stretch existing pastures and hay supplies. But is it enough? What else can be done to provide forage to our remaining livestock?

Although the weather forecast for the fall is not optimistic for improved moisture conditions, there will probably be some producers who receive timely moisture, perhaps more than expected. Should this opportunity present itself, what are the options an opportunistic producer might have for winter pasture production for this fall and winter? Since many of our warm-season pastures are grazed short, an opportunistic producer might consider interseeding/overseeding a small grain. However, there are several things to be considered.

Wheat provides the most flexibility as a crop. It can serve as a forage crop and also as a grain crop, if managed properly.

First consideration before planting small grains into warm-season pastures: winter pasture established into a warm-season perennial pasture will set back forage production of next year's warm-season pasture. Therefore, it is not recommended to interseed into your best pastures even if they are overgrazed this year. Select a pasture that is not the most productive, but has good production potential for small grains and preferably at least medium soil phosphorus levels. Introduced grass pasture like bermudagrass is ideal for interseeding, with native grass pasture being the least desirable as this practice will set back a native grass pasture for years if not permanently. An introduced pasture can often recover quickly with good management, but this is not the case for native grass pasture.

Second consideration: only plant the acres on which you are willing to sacrifice next year's warm-season production. If next summer is dry, these interseeded pastures may not have enough soil moisture to stimulate much production during the growing season. When spring moisture is limited, the small grains pasture will use most of the soil moisture. The spring production from the small grains may be highly productive, but, when it is done, don't plan for much additional production during the summer. To minimize the long-term effect on the warm-season pasture, do not plant more than 1 acre per mature cow.

Third consideration: only plant as much as you can afford to lose. Interseeding is not typically a recommended practice in most years. It is risky. However, if successful, it can provide at least earlier spring grazing and allow the remainder of your warm-season pastures an opportunity to recover in the spring before initiating grazing. If you are very fortunate, there may be some limited grazing available during the fall or winter.

What are our winter pasture options should we be lucky enough to receive rainfall in the fall? Following is information on the three most commonly recommended small grains used in our region plus information on ryegrass and two additional small grains. First, however, the keys to production are to watch the weather forecast and be prepared to pull the trigger.

Don't rush out and purchase all your inputs immediately, but do have your sources located and the preliminary activities performed – have equipment lined up or ready to use, seed and fertilizer located, and a soil test performed. Then watch the forecast. Even if moisture does not come during the early fall time frame, planting in the late fall with good moisture conditions could allow for stand establishment and then late winter and early spring production, which will be extremely valuable to the existing livestock.

Wheat provides the most flexibility as a crop. It can serve as a forage crop and also as a grain crop, if managed properly. Wheat is considered a winter-hardy small grain, although it is not as winter-hardy as rye. It produces well on a wide range of soils, with very sandy soils being the exception. Most of the production occurs in the spring, peaking in mid-April. Wheat produces forage longer than rye in the spring, but its fall and winter production is usually lower. Soft red winter wheat varieties are more consistent than the hard red winter wheat varieties in south-central Oklahoma.

Consistent forage producing varieties in the Noble Foundation winter variety trials are: Soft Red Winter – Coker 9134, Coker 9543, Coker 9663, Coker 9803 and Florida 302; and Hard Red Winter – Endurance, Deliver, Duster, Fannin, Jagger, Garrison, 2163, Custer, Longhorn and Coronado.

Rye is the most winter-hardy of the small grain crops. Compared to other annual winter grasses, rye produces the most fall and winter forage. It matures earlier in the spring than wheat, usually peaking in early April. Rye is the most productive cool-season annual grass on soils low in fertility, well drained and sandy in texture.

All forage rye varieties have similar growth. The Noble Foundation rye releases are the most popular in the region. Oklon is usually the earliest forage producer. Other varieties are Elbon, Bonel, Maton, Maton II and Bates.

Oat is the least winter-hardy small grain crop, with the early plantings more susceptible to winter-kill than later plantings. Oat can be planted in early fall or late winter. Keep in mind that forage production can be variable. Oat does not grow well on sandy soils, but tolerates wet, poorly drained soils better than other small grains.

Early forage producing varieties are Dallas and Harrison. Some of the more cold tolerant varieties are Ozark and 833.

Ryegrass is adaptable to a wide range of soil types, growing better on wet soils than most small grain crops and other cool-season annual grasses. It can be easily established by simply broadcasting seed on the soil surface or on grass sod. Ryegrass has less potential for fall grazing when compared to small grains. Ryegrass matures later than small grains, extending the grazing season into the month of June. For this reason, ryegrass is the most productive cool-season annual grass in our region. It also has excellent reseeding ability if properly managed. Ryegrass is not as cold or drought tolerant as rye and wheat.

When considering varieties, Marshall ryegrass has been a very consistent forage producer with good cold tolerance. Other varieties with early maturity, but perhaps less cold tolerance are TAM 90, Jackson, Rio, Passerel Plus and TAMTBO.

Barley and Triticale are other small grain crops, but are not as widely used. Barley is most noted for being tolerant of saline and alkaline soils. It does not grow well on sandy soils, but is drought tolerant. Barley is not as winter-hardy as wheat or rye. Triticale is a cross between wheat and rye. Its forage production and distribution is similar to wheat. Triticale is early maturing and susceptible to winter-kill.

Mixtures of small grains with ryegrass work well to extend the grazing season. Small grains interseeded into

a bermudagrass pasture need to be planted at a seeding rate of at least 60 pounds per acre, at a depth of 0.5 to 1.0 inch and preferably by November. Best results with small grains occur on prepared seedbeds planted at 120 pounds per acre. Ryegrass can be broadcast over small grain pasture, after the small grain is planted, at a rate of 10 to 15 pounds per acre.

Apply needed phosphorus at planting. Nitrogen should be applied once the stand is established, but ahead of peak use. ■