Stockpiled Summer Annual Forages as a Replacement for Fall Wheat Pasture

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Millions of cropland acres in the Southern Great Plains are planted to dual-purpose or graze-out wheat and other cool-season annuals each year. Forage production on these acres can range from a few hundred pounds of dry matter per acre, like we experienced during the winter drought of 2017-2018, to about 10,000 pounds of dry matter per acre. However, 4,000 to 6,000 pounds of forage dry matter per acre is probably more typical of small grains in Oklahoma and surrounding areas.

What if a portion of that forage could be replaced with something other than wheat in the fall? Is wheat what we should be growing for fall forage? I asked similar questions in an article titled “Changing it up” in the March 2018 issue of Hay & Forage Grower.

Some farmers have figured out some possible answers to these questions.

Cover crops – in this case more appropriately called multi-species grazing crops – can be planted in the summer and grazed in the fall or stockpiled to provide forage after the first frost. One farmer planted a mix of warm- and cool-season annuals on Aug. 24, 2017. His mix included mungbeans, guar, lentils, sorghum, pearl millet, browntop millet, corn, triticale, turnips, radishes, collards and sunflowers. By Oct. 26, 2017, he had just over 6,000 pounds of forage dry matter per acre. This farmer had moisture to plant into in late August but felt it was still too early to plant wheat. He had an opportunity and took advantage of it. This field produced more forage and grazing per acre than any of his wheat fields.

The same year, other farmers in the area had planted “cover crops” earlier in the summer. Because of favorable growing conditions, many of them had produced 10,000-plus pounds of forage dry matter per acre that they needed to deal with before they could plant wheat that fall. Some chose to graze those cover crops. Others chose to terminate them and plant wheat. The ones who planted wheat destroyed more forage than they will likely grow with wheat in two years.

I’m not against wheat. However, I think there are opportunities to increase production of some different annual forages on a portion of the acres normally planted to wheat. These cover crops, or multi-species grazing crops, will need to be managed differently than wheat. But considering the variability and unpredictability of the weather, they are another fall forage source that is worth considering.