

FORAGES WITH LIMITED IRRIGATION

Grain crop prices have dropped, water tables declined, and legal issues are limiting the amount of irrigation water available. Maybe it's time to think about planting forages instead.

Many irrigated acres may not receive enough water this summer to grow a good grain or root crop. And even if they do receive enough water, it may not be profitable to grow grain crops.

Forage crops also need water for highest production, but at least some useful yield can be gathered when total water available is very low. So what are your best options?

If you expect water limitations will continue for several more years, a perennial forage would eliminate the cost and time of establishing a new crop each year. Switchgrass is one good choice. It's less expensive to plant, its primary water needs occur in early summer when water usually is available, and it can be managed for hay or pasture. Other warm-season grass options include big or sand bluestem and indiangrass, especially for grazing. Some wheatgrasses and bromegrasses as well as alfalfa can work with limited irrigation, but these cool-season plants respond best to water applied during spring. Some irrigators won't have water available until after this most efficient time has passed.

Of course, annual forages like pearl and foxtail millet, cane, teff, and sorghum-sudangrass are relatively water efficient and will yield proportionately to the amount of water they receive. And this spring especially, don't forget small grains like oats and spring-type varieties of rye, barley, and triticale for spring forage if you have moisture at those times.

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