

IRRIGATING PASTURES

Many pivots have been planted to pasture during the past couple of years. Most will be very productive, but chances of success increase if they are watered correctly.

Lack of profit from row crops plus better prospects from livestock have added up to converting row crop pivots into irrigated pasture on many farms. And why not? It's possible to produce a thousand pounds of gain per acre with yearling steers or carry 200 cow/calf pairs for five months on a single, productive, well-managed 130-acre circle.

Success with irrigated pasture, though, requires proper water management. With row crops, irrigation generally is used to supply moisture to a three to four-foot root zone. Many plants in irrigated pastures, though, tend to be more shallow rooted. They may have over 95 percent of their roots in the top two or three feet of soil. As a result, they become moisture stressed more quickly, and soil moisture at the four-foot level may not be very useful.

Don't irrigate pasture the same way you irrigate corn. Water use will average about a quarter inch per day, but use starts much earlier and continues later into the season than for row crops. So irrigate throughout the growing season whenever rain isn't doing its job.

Pastures need irrigation more frequently than row crops if they are to produce up to their potential. Ideally, it would be nice to apply one-half to three-quarters of an inch a couple times each week. And if possible, avoid irrigating where animals are grazing or will graze before the soil surface dries to minimize compaction.

It takes a little bit more management skill and attention to irrigate pastures properly. But when you do, the results are well worth it.

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