

PREPARING CRP FOR PASTURE AND HAY USE

Many CRP acres containing warm-season grasses need thicker stands plus weed and brush control before returning to production. Excessive dead litter, thistles, and cedar trees are 3 of the worst problems.

The fastest and most effective way to stimulate warm-season grass stands to thicken and also to control cedar trees is with prescribed burning in the spring. Obviously, only use fire, though, where it can be handled safely and legally, and where it won't cause other potential problems like wind erosion. Your local NRCS and extension offices have assistance and more information available.

Another way to improve conditions is to remove old growth by haying. This can be challenging, however, especially if the terrain is rough or the amount of dead material is great or if pocket gophers have built many mounds that can plug equipment or if many small trees have invaded your grassland. In addition, the hay removed will need both protein and energy supplements to feed it to livestock.

I especially like another technique that breaks down old growth and opens stands up to induce thickening – winter grazing with high animal density. Feeding hay or grazing all your cows on just a couple acres at a time each week will trample dead litter into the ground and open up the soil for new seedlings and tillers. Move to a fresh area each week until you've beaten down all your CRP acres. You also get a similar result by using CRP as a calving pasture, getting the trampling, the nutrient recycling, and excellent bedding all at the same time.

As CRP contracts expire, new uses must be planned. Get your land in shape now so it can be used effectively later.

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