Ben Beckman
Beef Systems Asst. Extension Educator
101 E Center P.O. Box 368
Hartington, NE 68739
402-254-6821
ben.beckman@unl.edu

Planning for Early Season Forage
03-18-24

With Nebraska Extension, I'm Ben Beckman.

Spring is fast approaching and producers looking for a bit of extra forage to supplement low hay stocks this year may consider planting a spring crop. Spring oats are one option that can be planted early, produce a large amount of high-quality forage, and are adaptable to fit for your particular system.

Typically in northeast Nebraska, planting dates for oats range from the middle of March into late April. This gives us a window to plan for, but ideally, soil temperatures should be the ultimate factor for putting seed in the ground. Oats germinate when soil temperatures are above 40°F. When we hit that milestone and are past the danger of a killing frost, planting can commence.

Seed at a rate of 60-80 lbs/ac on dryland and up to 100 lbs/ac on irrigated fields to get maximum production. 40-60 lbs of nitrogen can also boost yields, though with high fertilizer prices, a smaller rate or alterative nutrient source like manure may be worth consideration. With the right conditions, oats can support 1 to 2 cows per acre for several months, or provides the flexibility to harvest as hay, green chop, or silage. If allowed to grow to maturity, production of 2-2.5 ton/acre are common.

Once they begin growth, oats can come on fast. If grazing, be prepared to turn out once plants get around 5-6 inches in height, usually around mid to late May. If left unused, plants can quickly grow up to a foot and mature in no time. At this point the plant will be trying to initiate seed production, so if grazed, regrowth may be limited. Keeping plants vegetative and grazing before they reach 8 inches in height keeps new growth occurring and will stretch the grazable period out.

Oats can be mixed with other forage species to add diversity and further extend the grazing period. Brassicas like turnip, collards, and canola can provide high quality forage, but will tend to mature quickly and bolt as temperatures warm, so grazing early and often is recommended. Legumes like spring pea can decrease nitrogen demand and provide forage, while vetch may be added purely for it's nitrogen benefits.

From a grass standpoint, other spring grains like triticale and barley can add production and extended grazing. Annual ryegrass is another option to consider that pairs well with oats. Ryegrass grows rapidly later in the spring, usually around early June, about the time oats are slowing down. With enough water, it's a high quality forage that can provide grazing opportunity well into the summer and into the fall. To seed an oat/ryegrass mix, 60-70 lbs/oats per acre along with 15-20 lbs/ryegrass per acre should provide a good mix. Growth might be a bit slower to initiate, so grazing may need to be a bit lighter to in the beginning. However, the extended grazing period into the summer will more than made up a slower start.

For Nebraska Extension, I'm Ben Beckman