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SHORT PASTURE CONCERNS

A cool spring and dry weather has resulted in lower than expected pasture production. With summer upon us, even ample moisture now may not return pastures to full productivity. So what can we do to stretch a limited forage supply?

While plants that prefer cool temperatures like brassicas and small grains may not be an option to plant, those needing summer forage are right on time to get heat loving species like sorghums, sorghum sudan hybrids, millets and sudangrass in the ground. These annual grasses can produce large amounts of forage for harvest. Different options lend themselves to different harvest methods, so know how you plan on feeding or grazing before you plant.

Another way to stretch pasture is through improved utilization. Under typical grazing conditions, we only plan on cattle grazing 25% of a pastures production. Half is left for plant health while another quarter is fouled or trampled. Something as simple as a single wire electric cross fence can improve this grazing efficiency to 35%. When paired with a back fence, the rest provided to previously grazed plants can aid in recovery and provide regrowth for use later in the year.

Finally, begin looking at herd records now and make a plan for destocking later on in the year if conditions continue to deteriorate.

One option producers may consider that often does more harm than good from a pasture perspective is supplemental feeding. Creep feeding calves and providing supplement to cows can help boost their nutritional intake and improve calf weight or cow condition. Since we are providing extra feed, you would think that the amount of grass consumed would proportionally decrease, but that isn't the case. Here's why.

With cows, unless the supplied feed matches or is lower than pasture grass in quality, it will speed up the digestive process. Ruminants like cattle rely on microbes in the rumen to break down fibers like cellulose in grasses that otherwise would be unusable. How long this takes depends up on the quality of the grass being broke down. Young tender plants have less fiber and provide ample protein to feed microbes responsible for fiber break down so passage is fairly quick. When plants mature or stressed by drought, the proportion of fiber increases and amount of protein to fuel deconstruction decreases. This makes the whole process take longer, thus cattle actually consume less of lower quality feeds.

By providing high protein and energy supplement, we speed the rumen back up and cattle end up running out of grass sooner. Keeping animals grazing as long as possible then confining them to a sacrifice area where supplemental feed and hay can be provided to maintain condition might be a better strategy to save pasture health during dry times than supplementing on grass.

Another option that may look attractive is creep feeding calves to maintain growth. Again, where forage intake of the cow and calf is severely limited this may be true, but it often leads to over grazing faster.

As calves grow larger while on creep feed, their appetite grows as well. This means more milk is consumed from mom, and after they begin foraging in the pasture themselves, more grass. Increased milk demand will drive the cow to produce more milk, driving her forage consumption up as well. When forage is already limited this doesn't matter, but if we are trying to save or stretch pasture, creep feeding, can end up shortening the grazing period instead.

Planning for a short forage year is not a task we want to undertake in June, but may be needed this year. If the worst does come to pass, looking at other forage options, better utilizing pasture, supplementing feed appropriately, and planning for destocking now will be worth the effort.

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