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While “grazing season” typically means some time between May and October in Nebraska, just because colder temperatures have returned doesn’t mean grazing is over. However as the seasons do change, our forage resources change as well.

One of the most noticeable shifts is in pastures. Native warm season dominated grazing resources are on the downhill slide for the year. Their productivity has peaked and forage quality will continue to decline. While not as easily digestible as before, winter grazing on range can provide a decent amount of nutritional demands to dry cows. Just keep an eye on animal condition and be prepared to supplement when needed.

In cool season pastures, mainly brome, plants may stay green for several weeks yet. Moisture is the key factor here, and the dry summer and fall has not been helpful. Still, if plants have been able to grow, brief cold snaps like earlier this week will not push plants into full dormancy yet. Be cautious however when grazing these pastures that we don’t push things too far. With little fresh growth to utilize, animals will focus on any green plants available. Overgrazing can easily occur even though the rest of the pasture is hardly utilized.

One of the most economical options for fall grazing are crop residues. Corn stalks in particular can easily meet the protein and energy requirements of a dry cow and are often cheaper to lease than pasture. As more and more crops come out of the field, working residues into a grazing plan is a great way to trim feed costs and give pasture a break.

Finally, lets look at annual forage options. Again we can split our management into warm season and cool season crops. Warm season annuals like forage sorghum, sorghum sudan hybrids, and millets have probably been killed off with the latest hard freezes. Remember frost damage in sorghum and sudan species can lead to prussic acid poisoning, so pulling off for at least 5 days following a freeze whenever a new portion of the plant is harmed is important. However, once the entire plant has been killed, go ahead and keep on grazing.

These warm season forages are best used as a stockpiled forage resource. While hay production or windrow grazing are great options for use, both require temperatures and sun for adequate dry down. Trying to do so this late in the year can be sketchy. Instead use strip grazing of standing fields to increase utilization and limit trampling.

Cool season forages like oats, brassicas, or other small grains can be a high quality forage source if enough time has elapsed between planting and grazing. We need plenty of time to get plants up and growing to produce enough yield, so early planting is critical if fall grazing is a goal. If up and growing however, these forages can be an extremely high quality grazing option. Species like rye we want to graze next spring need to be handled with care. While some grazing in the fall is permissible, pushing too hard can cause winterkill and slow growth in the spring. For non-winter hardy species like oats and some brassicas, quality will be held steady well past the time plants die off from the cold. In these cases, grazing now or stockpiling for later are both great options.

With such high quality however, we want to use them appropriately. Grazing animals with high nutrient needs like yearlings, low body condition dry cows, or lactating fall calving cows is a great option. Likewise, limiting access a small section at a time and providing lower quality hay for rumen fill can prevent this resource from being wasted on lower demand animals like dry cows.

Fall isn't the time to pull back from grazing yet, but we do need to shift management to match our grazing resources. Whether using stockpiled native range, the last flush of a brome pasture, crop residues, a standing sorghum-sudan hybrid field, or lush oat/brassica growth, balance animal requirements with your forage resource to get the most out of your grazing this fall.

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