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FROST SEED LEGUMES INTO PASTURES AND HAY MEADOWS

Can you afford to fertilize your pastures with expensive nitrogen? Maybe you can if you graze effectively, but there may be a better solution - add legumes.

Legumes like red clover and alfalfa reduce nitrogen costs on pastures and make them more productive and higher quality. But, to add legumes to your grass you must accomplish three tasks correctly.

First, fertilize for the legume. Legumes need extra phosphorus and a soil pH above 6, and sometimes higher, to establish and grow in a grass sod. So, add phosphorus and maybe even lime if needed.

Second, place seed into the soil. One way is by frost seeding, which involves broadcasting seed on snow-free fields during winter. Right now is an excellent time for frost seeding. The freezing and thawing of the soil as spring approaches helps work the seed into the ground. Results from frost seeding have been variable in our area, though. Red clover is the only legume that has given good results with broadcasting. So instead, I suggest using a drill whenever possible, even if all it does is barely scratch your seed into the soil. You'll get faster, more uniform stands that way.

Finally, during spring, reduce competition from the existing sod. I think the best option is flash grazing. Whenever grass gets 3 to 4 inches taller than legumes this spring, stock heavily so animals graze grass down to the height of the legumes in just one day. Then remove livestock until grass gets tall again and repeat the flash grazing.

Once established, legumes will cut your fertilizer costs and make your grasslands better than ever.

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