

Forage Tips from the Pros

Managing pastures to maximize production and efficiency while curbing costs.

by **Kindra Gordon**

As the summer grazing season sets in, producers should access their pasture management practices. An important question to ponder: Are you using your forage resources to their full potential?

For some perspective, Garry Lacefield, a longtime forage specialist with the University of Kentucky, suggests producers think about efficiency, sustainability and profitability. That said, he shares several farmer feel-good statistics:

- In 1950 the average farmer fed 18 people. In 2015 the average farmer produced enough to feed 169 people.
- In 1950 consumers spent 22% of their take-home pay on food. In 2015 consumers spend 9.5% of income on food.

“That’s efficiency,” notes Lacefield, and a testament to the productivity of and advancements in American agriculture. But Lacefield

notes some challenging statistics as well:

- Food production must increase 50-70% to supply enough food for the 9-plus billion people who will populate the planet by 2050.
- It’s estimated 70-100% more animal protein (meat and dairy) will be needed with this increased population.
- There has been a loss of 1 million acres of agricultural land in the U.S. each year for the past 25 years.

Within that framework, American farmers must address the challenges ahead and continue to produce the food, fiber and fuel to supply the world’s needs. Lacefield and his colleague Don Ball, professor emeritus at Auburn University, believe better management of forages will be essential to those challenges.

Lacefield acknowledges grain feeding will always exist, but he believes opportunities must be explored to improve forage management and use to lessen time on grain, which in turn may reduce costs.

With regard to sustainable food production, Lacefield emphasizes that the question must always be asked: “How much did it cost to get there?”

He says a producer’s guiding principles with regard to high quality forage production should be 1) establish for stand, 2) produce for yield, 3) harvest for quality and 4) market for profit.

Lacefield also suggests that producers keep the acronym “VALUE” in mind. He explains that it stands for:

- V** = vegetation provides higher forage quality vs. forage stands with seed heads;
- A** = availability of forages;
- L** = legumes are beneficial if they fit your environment;
- U** = utilization, which can be enhanced with cross-fencing and rotational grazing; and
- E** = efficiency, which requires attention not only to forages, but also to herd health and genetics.

More points to ponder

From his perspective, Ball says to improve profitability, there are several strategies to evaluate — topping the list: Know your forage crop options and your animal nutritional needs. Additional strategies include exercising good grazing management, minimizing



stored-feed needs and soil testing, among others.

Lacefield and Ball also advocate the use of legumes whenever feasible, calling them “forage crop superstars.” They explain that through nitrogen fixation, legumes boost plant production and forage quality, which can help lower cost of gain and extend the grazing season.

Regarding hay, this duo cautions against feeding poor quality hay. Ball says it “brings double woe” because intake declines and digestion is slowed. Ball also emphasizes that most producers lose money because of poor hay storage practices — resulting in reduced quality hay.

Most importantly, Ball emphasizes, “Results require investments. If you think about the best managers you know, they rarely get something for nothing.”

Lacefield concludes, “The goal should be to have a system that will optimize the number of days grazing and minimize the number of days using stored feed. Every day grazed is money saved.”

Manage weeds, too

With regard to pasture productivity and profitability, Dow AgroSciences’ Scott Flynn says, “The easiest and cheapest way to improve profitability is to improve pastures.” Flynn estimates that particularly in high rainfall areas, landowners give up about 30% of their pasture’s potential due to lack of weed control.

He adds, “Pastures are a cheap source of feed for cattle,” — making them worth the investment to renovate or improve.

That said, Flynn emphasizes pasture improvements are not something accomplished in a single day. “It may take a year of planning or a few growing seasons to plan and address issues before you are ready to plant.”

Among the important considerations for pasture improvements, Flynn notes that weeds and brush should be controlled; then the needs of the operation should be identified before forages are selected.

Once it’s time to plant, timing of planting, seedbed preparation, soil fertility testing, equipment used and investing in certified seed are important, he underscores. He also emphasizes the need to have a plan to address weed issues after planting to ensure long-term success of the pasture improvements. **HW**

Editor’s note: *Learn more about pasture renovation tools at dowagro.com/en-us/range/.*

