

Spring Pasture Considerations

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Spring pasture conditions will reflect the drought experienced by many areas last summer. In many cases pastures were overgrazed due to drought, intense heat and increased hay costs. With green-up just around the corner, consider management options for drought and grazing stressed pastures.

Limited rain and overgrazing result in stand thinning, with increased bare ground and reduced desirable forage canopies, annual and perennial weeds begin to overtake the stand. A survey of 37 pastures across the East and Midwestern US suggests weed pressure increases in pasture systems when the above ground dry matter is less than 1,350 lbs. In a good stand of fescue with 300 lbs. of DM per inch, producers need to maintain a 4.5 inch residual to minimize weed encroachment.

Weed encroachment in pastures can be detrimental due to increased poisonous plant density, reduced forage quality, un-even grazing distribution and overall reduced pasture productivity. During periods of limited resources weeds compete with desirable forages for water and soil nutrients and may shade desirable forage species.

Weeds tend to become a “problem” when they are tall or dense enough to be noticed in pastures. Waiting to manage weeds until after they are noticeable may result in the passing of the optimum treatment control window. Discuss weed control options and application timing for your area with your regional Agronomy specialist before green-up to ensure timely application of control options.

Mowing is one weed control option used by many operations to reduce the weed seed bank while cleaning up pastures. Unfortunately once weeds get to mowing height they have already reduced available water and nutrients to pasture forages.

In pastures with severe overgrazing or excessive weed infestation producers may consider renovating pastures using smother crops. Some producers attempted to capitalize on rising corn prices last year by using corn as the smother crop to renovate endophyte-infected pastures. Alternatively producers may consider using annual forages such as pearl millet or sorghum sudangrass to restock hay supplies and smother endophyte-infected pastures followed by fall re-seeding. Begin evaluating pastures at green-up to identify pastures slow to recover from drought damage and consider renovation.

Give drought damaged pastures opportunity to green-up and develop growing leaves prior to initial spring grazing. In overgrazed or drought stressed pastures root reserves are likely reduced. In early spring, grass growth is supported by root energy reserves until sufficient leaf area is available produce energy. Consider delayed grazing of drought-stressed pastures to allow development of sufficient leaf area and prevent plant stress and further root reserve reductions.

March is tends to be a bit late for frost seeding of legumes due to reduced freeze and thaw cycles. However in areas where bare ground is present and weed control or renovation is not planned over-seeding red clover, ladino clover or lespedeza offers opportunity to fill in bare spots while improving forage quality. Legume seeding will be most successful in areas with soil pH of 6.0 or greater.

In pastures where legumes can be drilled seeding dates can extend into April. Drought stressed grass pastures are the best candidates for establishing legumes since grass will be slow to green-up thus allowing legumes increased opportunity to germinate and reduced shading once established. Legume seeding success will be reduced if nitrogen fertilizer is planned spring application.

Another method to improve drought stressed pasture stands is application of spring nitrogen fertilizer. While fall application for stockpiling is generally preferred due to excessive spring grass production, in the case of thin stands fertilizer use may improve early growth and recovery. Pastures receiving fall nitrogen fertilization that did not receive adequate rainfall for stockpiling should carry over nitrogen into the spring.

Several management options are available for drought stressed forages. Scouting pastures around green-up provides opportunities for producers to develop management plans while time is available to implement these programs prior to the grazing season.



