

Planning Forage Programs

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While speaking at a bermudagrass training in Carnesville, Ricky Josey, Franklin County Extension Agent, made an interesting comment that should be reemphasized. Ricky pointed out that most successful forage managers have two characteristics: (1) they plan management decisions well in advance and (2) they plant, fertilize and harvest at appropriate (not necessarily convenient) times. I strongly agree with Ricky's comments and believe that pastures and hayfields always benefit from planning and timely management. Unfortunately, forages are treated as a byproduct on many farms. Many pastures are considered "unproductive land" and are used to dispose of poultry litter or supply a little low-input grazing. Careful planning and a few inputs can transform these "waste" areas into profitable and productive enterprises. In fact, a little planning should prevent unnecessary purchases and save money by improving establishment success, persistence, productivity and quality. To emphasize this, I've included a few planning examples for summer and fall forage crops below.

Planning for summer forage crops.

Organize sprigging operations for hybrid bermudagrass well in advance. Soil should be tested immediately to determine if lime, phosphate or potash is needed. It takes lime several months to increase soil pH, so it's already too late to get much activity from liming. Apply herbicides and prepare seedbeds to decrease weed competition and improve sprig survival. Remember that common bermudagrass is difficult to eradicate and it may take several tillage cycles and herbicide applications to clean a field up before sprigging hybrid varieties. Common bermudagrass *cannot* be eliminated in the two weeks prior to sprigging. I've visited with producers who are preparing land for sprigging in 2003. These farmers stand a much better chance of success since they will have fertile, weed-free soil that can be sprigged at the optimum time next year. Considering the costs involved with establishing hybrid bermudagrass, advance planning is an excellent investment.

If you are going to seed bermudagrass, reserve a good variety of seed well in advance. Cheyenne and Rancho Frio are well-adapted high-quality bermudagrasses that can produce yields similar to hybrid varieties in North Georgia. However, Cheyenne is a poor seed producer and supplies are usually limited. By the time this article is published, good seeded bermudagrass varieties will be difficult to find and many of the available varieties will not persist or will be less productive. Advance planning helps guarantee availability of productive high quality seed.

Make sure equipment is field-ready before planting or hay season begins. Many planting dates and hay cuttings have been missed because of broken-down equipment. Checking bearings and belts a few weeks in advance can be the difference between excellent quality hay and straw.

Planning for fall forage crops.

Now is the ideal time to plan fall forage plantings. If a tall fescue pasture needs renovation, collect a soil sample and apply the recommended rates of lime. If endophyte-free or MaxQ tall fescue is to be established and you are unsure if the existing stand is infected with the toxic endophyte, have the pasture tested. County agents can assist with this procedure. Do not allow toxic fescue fields that will be renovated to produce seed. To completely eliminate all toxic plants in the pasture before fall establishment, follow a *spray-smother-spray* procedure. (1) *Spray* Roundup or Gramoxone to kill the majority of existing tall fescue plants. (2) Establish pearl millet or sorghum-sudan to supply grazing or hay during summer months and *smother* surviving fescue plants. (3) *Spray* the field again following the summer annual crop to remove all remaining tall fescue. (4) Establish endophyte-free or MaxQ tall fescue. Planning ahead and following this procedure insures that the stand will be nontoxic for years to come.

Plan ahead if clovers or small grains are to be fall overseeded in pastures. Herbicide applications can negatively impact clover, small grains and ryegrass seedlings. If you are overseeding, read the herbicide labels carefully and use products that are compatible with fall seeding.

Determine if lime or nutrients are needed for good clover establishment and bermudagrass persistence. Soil testing is one of the best services offered in Georgia and, even though it is free to producers, it's still underutilized. Proper liming improves nutrient availability if soil pH is low. Potash and phosphate are critical for good clover growth and adequate potash is important to maintain bermudagrass hayfields.

Remove residue during early fall on pastures that will be overseeded. This improves both small grain and clover establishment. Heavy thatch and residue decrease seed contact and shade newly emerged seedlings. Planning grazing to remove this residue will improve overseeding establishment success.

Planning and evaluating the "big picture".

Think about your overall forage program beginning with the most basic questions. Often producers plan elaborate grazing systems without addressing basic problems in their overall management. For example, a short calving season allows poor quality forage to be fed to dry cows and higher quality hay to be fed when cows are lactating and have higher nutritional needs. Sit down with a pad of paper and pencil and think about forage needs and cattle management. Here are a few starting questions. When does my overall herd have the highest nutritional requirements? Is forage quality and production adequate during this time? When am I typically short of forage? Is more hay needed? Is it cheaper

to buy or custom harvest hay than to bale it myself? Will my hay meet animal requirements or are supplements needed? Can hay feeding be reduced with complimentary forage crops, crop residues, or byproduct feedstuffs? When must these complimentary forages be planted and what are their nutrient, establishment and grazing management requirements?

The old adage “People don’t plan to fail, they fail to plan” unfortunately often applies to forage programs. Determine what direction your forage program needs to travel. Once problems and goals are identified, potential solutions and overall forage and beef enterprise management can be planned. Remember that both timeliness and planning are important factors needed to successfully improve forage programs. Don’t neglect either of these factors.