Ten Tips for February Forage Management

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Many cattlemen assume that pasture and hay management is only effective or necessary while forages are actively growing. There are several easy and effective practices that can be applied in late winter to improve forage production. In this article I'll discuss a few of the most important winter forage management practices for both south and north Georgia.

1) Use controlled grazing to improve utilization of winter annual pastures. Rye, wheat, oats, and ryegrass are high quality forages and should be treated as such. Grazing access of mature cows being fed hay should be limited to two hours per day. Grazing on alternate days is also an acceptable management practice to stretch supplies. Utilizing rotational grazing allows good utilization of rapidly growing winter annuals late in the season. Rotational grazing will also permit hay or baleage harvest if excess forage from ungrazed paddocks is available.
2) Consider a spring nitrogen application for winter annual pastures. If growing conditions have been favorable and above average amounts of fall forage was produced, an additional application may be necessary.
3) Finalize preparations for spring bermudagrass sprigging. Smooth fields, test soils, and reserve sprigs of a high quality variety. Sprigging hybrid bermudagrass just before greenup is an excellent way to establish this species. High levels of stored energy are present in dormant sprigs which favors vigorous establishment. Cool spring temperatures reduce risk sprigs heating or drying at establishment. Early sprigged bermudagrass also has a headstart on weedy crabgrass which typically germinates later in the spring.
4) Check existing bermudagrass pastures for health. February is an excellent month to determine bermudagrass stand density. Dormant bermudagrass color is distinctly different from crabgrass, broomsedge, and many other weeds. Pastures are also closely grazed in February which allows for easy stand evaluation. If bermudagrass appears thin or irregular, conduct a soil test and *follow recommendations*. It is far cheaper to apply lime and potash than to totally reestablish a pasture and lose a full year of production. Your county agent can help with individual recommendations regarding bermudagrass pasture management.
5) Consider burning bermudagrass hayfields. Fire is an excellent tool to decrease winter annual weeds, hasten spring greenup, decrease spittlebug pressure, and release nutrients bound in thatch. Dr. Robert Morgan wrote an excellent article in the *Georgia Cattleman* February 2002 issue which lists principles and benefits of burning bermudagrass. The article also contains excellent information on average greenup dates and burn timing. Be sure to follow all safety precautions and burn in favorable weather. Contact the Georgia Forestry Commission for more information on burn bans and safety.
6) Consider broadcasting red or white clover into closely grazed tall fescue pastures. When properly conducted, frost seeding can be an effective method for

establishing legumes in tall fescue pastures. Red clover has higher yields and seedling vigor than white clover and will provide grazing into summer months. White clover is tolerant of close grazing and will persist 2 years or more depending on variety selection and management. Recent progress in grazing persistence for both red and white clovers has made overseeding legumes an attractive practice. More information on clover varieties and establishment are available at the Georgia Forages website and at your county extension office.

7) North Georgia producers can also begin site preparation for establishing seed-type bermudagrass varieties. Cheyenne and KF194 bermudagrass varieties have persisted well in Athens and Calhoun yield trials conducted by Dr. Carl Hoveland. Seed types are cheaper to establish than hybrid types, but there is risk of stand loss during the establishment year from crabgrass competition. Seed supplies of both varieties are always tight, so the earlier seed is booked the better. Seed-type varieties have not persisted well in south Georgia trials, so hybrid bermudagrass varieties remain the only high-yielding option in that area.
8) Fertilize tall fescue for spring hay and pasture production. This is particularly useful in mild weather when good late winter production can occur.
9) Avoid grazing newly planted tall fescue until plants are well rooted. This allows proper plant establishment for improved summer survival. Periodic light grazing is also acceptable after plants are well rooted. Light grazing can stimulate new shoot growth and decrease pressure from palatable weed species. New tall fescue plantings can also be harvested for hay *in late spring at the early boot stage*. Cut plants at a 3 inch height to allow adequate material for regrowth. *Do not* delay hay harvest of new tall fescue plantings until plants reach full maturity. Not only does this produce low quality hay, it also permits crown shading and favors slow regrowth and open stands which are favorable for weed encroachment. Late hay cuttings can damage stands due to late tall fescue regrowth. This regrowth depletes plant energy reserves in critical hot and dry months.
10) Begin planning to replace tall fescue fields this fall. Friendly endophyte technology (i.e. MaxQ) is becoming the “gold standard” for cool season perennial pastures in the southeastern U.S. A *spray-smother-spray* replacement approach is currently recommended for total elimination of toxic tall fescue stands. This renovation process begins in spring months, so begin planning for herbicide applications and smother crop seed. Failure to plan for fall plantings will limit fall variety choices to less persistent endophyte-free or toxic tall fescue varieties. More information on friendly endophyte tall fescue and replacement techniques can be found at your local county extension office.