
Patching

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Growing up as a boy on a farm during the Great Depression, money was short so holes in socks were darned and patches sewed on holes in clothing. The labor needed to do this patching was substantial but it was a way to make it through hard times. The long drought we have suffered in Georgia this spring and summer has been devastating and it is going to take some patching to get cattle through the next winter. Unfortunately, it is going to take some money to do this but starving the cattle next winter will be more costly in terms of reduced cow conception rates.

Where are we at now?

Most Georgia cattle producers suffered severe losses from drought in pasture and hay production so are ill prepared for winter. Many have been feeding their limited hay supplies to keep cows alive. Hopefully, producers have carefully culled open or poor cows from herds and sent them to market to reduce

autumn and winter forage needs.

Most perennial pastures have been grazed hard during the summer heat and drought. Bahiagrass stands should be fine as this grass can tolerate the abuse. Bermudagrass stands may be thinned in places and will take time to recover their full yield potential. Late summer and autumn production on some of these bermudagrass pastures will be short this year even with late season rains. Stands of tall fescue will be thinned on many farms, reducing autumn and winter forage production. In south Georgia stands of Georgia-5 tall fescue may be lost, especially on drier upland sites. When rains come, look for more weeds germinating and filling in the vacant spots of pastures.

What can be done to improve autumn and winter forage supplies?

The cost of planting temporary winter pastures has to be measured against the cost of purchased hay. Hay will likely be expensive, even for low quality stuff. Thus, cow-calf producers need to look at other alternatives even though they cost more than the usual bahia-bermuda or tall fescue pasture and hay systems.

(1) In tall fescue areas, if stands are good they should be fertilized with 60 to 75 lb N/acre in September to utilize autumn rainfall and provide early grazing and stockpiled forage for winter. If tall fescue stands are poor, then no-till planting of rye or wheat can provide additional grazing.

(2) When feed supplies are short the question arises as to whether it will pay to apply nitrogen in September on bermudagrass and bahiagrass in south Georgia. Usually, this does not pay off but if the long range weather forecast is for above normal temperatures, then it may be worthwhile to apply nitrogen to stimulate some much-needed autumn grazing. Of course, if it doesn't rain then the money will be wasted.

(3) On land coming out of summer crops, browntop millet or pearl millet can be planted in September for some autumn

grazing in south Georgia. Since the productive season will be short on either grass, browntop millet is probably the better choice as seed will be cheaper than pearl millet.

(4) The most dependable source of winter grazing will be planting rye, wheat, or oats on prepared land. This can be planted from late September to early October in the Coastal Plain, and mid September to early October in the Piedmont. Rye is preferred as it will produce earlier forage and grow better in cold weather even though it matures earlier in spring than wheat. Unfortunately, the crop was poor this past spring, resulting in higher seed prices and low seed germination. There will be a temptation to plant as early as possible but disease problems can wipe out early planted stands. Treat seed with a fungicide, Vitavax 200 or Thiram, to reduce disease problems. This will not control damping-off (Pythium) disease. On early-planted stands in south Georgia, apply only 40 lb N/acre in case stands are lost from damping-off disease. If stands remain, then apply an additional 40 lb N/acre in November when grazing begins. Since small grain pasture is very high quality and expensive as the sole forage for beef cows, it is cheaper to limit graze cattle for a few hours each day or two if there is some nearby low-quality hay or pasture.

(5) Rye or wheat can be no-till planted on bermudagrass or bahiagrass sods from late October to mid-November but will generally provide little grazing before February.

(6) Annual ryegrass is a wonderful cool season pasture plant and is easy to establish but will not provide any autumn grazing unless we are lucky enough to have a wet autumn.

Drought has dealt a devastating blow to cattle producers this year. All of the temporary solutions require extra effort similar to sewing patches on clothes back in Depression Days. Hard times may make it necessary for cattle producers to do some patching this year to survive and be ready for better days.