5 frequently asked pasture questions

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In the upper transition zone, most of our pastures consist of cool-season forage species. There are some natives that have been reintroduced; however, the vast majority of the forage acres are improved with Kentucky 31 tall fescue.

This endophyte-infected fescue has been touted to have saved several tons of topsoil. In addition, it is often said that if it weren't for tall fescue, this region wouldn't have the beef industry it has today.

Unfortunately, the beef industry has come off of record-high feeder cattle prices. Today's market is valuing a calf at only 50 percent of what it was worth 15 months ago. This drastic reduction in feeder calf value translates to lower returns for the cow-calf operation.

These tighter margins require forage-based livestock operations to reap as much as possible from the forage produced on their acres while also protecting this resource.

Yet the knee-jerk reaction is to cinch the purse strings tightly closed. The reluctance to maintain soil fertility, interseed pastures and apply sound management practices can lead to long-term degradation of pastures.

With this in mind, let's consider pasture management. What questions come to mind for improved pastures during these and "normal" times?

I polled our county-based staff for input, kicked around the questions I frequently receive and picked the brain of my fellow forage specialist to come up with a "top five." See if any of these make your list and, if you have others, I'd be interested in hearing what they would be.

How do I control weed ‘x’?

Repeated droughts, reduced soil fertility, overgrazing and other factors have resulted in an increase in the prevalence of weeds in many pastures. Controlling these undesirable plants are frequent discussions. Yet there is not a silver bullet in most cases.

You need to ask yourself, “Why did this weed grow here in the first place?” Maybe there wasn’t any grass or another desired forage species in its spot.

Without a desirable species, there isn’t any competition to prevent that weed from growing. Cultural practices such as soil fertility, interseeding to increase the desirable forage species and selecting forage types that will thrive in your area, and under your grazing management, can lower the opportunity for weeds to compete in pastures.

When considering chemical control methods, be certain to visit with someone knowledgeable. For the best success, utilizing the right chemical at the correct time and application rate is essential. The less frequently asked question, but probably the more important one, is when weed control should be applied to a field.

I posed this question recently to a weed specialist and received the “it depends” response. However, I feel “it depends” is the correct answer, as there are many factors that must be considered before opting to apply a planned pasture weed control protocol.

I strongly encourage you to visit with your county extension educator, weed or pasture specialist, or agronomist before you begin spraying.

Do I need to apply the amount of fertilizer the soil test calls for?

With lower profit margins, this question begins to arise after soil test results begin coming into our county offices. Soil test results and fertility recommendations should be discussed with an agronomist or extension educator.

My view on fertility and pasture management is like asking a drag car driver to win the race on 87-octane fuel. (Drag racing fuel is often 110 to 120 octane.)

To obtain the best forage production, stand persistency and maintain the forage species you desire, plants need nutrients to grow and thrive. With a high degree of grazing management, we can enhance manure nutrient distribution back to the pasture forages, lowering the pasture maintenance fertility needs once soil levels reach the targeted levels.

Thus, I suggest you submit soil samples every three years from pastures, follow the recommendations for fertilizer application rates and then adhere to managed grazing practices to obtain more uniform manure distribution.

Can I broadcast grass seed to thicken my weak grass stand?

When making the investment in seed to improve a pasture forage stand, give the seed the best opportunity to germinate. For many grass seeds, planting them ¼ inch to ½ inch is best to ensure there is seed-to-soil contact.

Many seeds that are on top of the ground from broadcast seeding will germinate, dry up and die. Ryegrass has a unique ability to germinate and send the root downward toward the soil, making it suitable for broadcast seeding.

For most grass species used in the upper transition area, it is best to no-till drill or plant into a prepared seedbed for the best success in establishing the new stand. Be sure to seed at the recommended rate and calibrate the drill to ensure you are getting the correct seeding rate. Also, take the time to check your planting depth often.

What should I seed to improve my pasture stand?

There are several options when choosing the type of forage to plant when establishing a new pasture. Before you begin, consider studying forage variety data from university trials in your area. Variety trial data can assist you in identifying top performers for your region.

This information is valuable when you purchase seed. If the top variety is not available, you will have the knowledge to select an alternate, rather than settling for lower-performing seed. The forages you choose need to fit your intended management, soil types and environments.

Too often, we see individuals attempt to take something from another region only to see a stand failure later. Examples may be a lack of cold tolerance, a forage that needs well-drained soils planted in heavy poorly drained areas, a shallow-rooted forage planted in sandy drought-prone soils or a forage that requires a high level of fertility that is not applied.

In addition, from an animal's perspective, one should consider anti-nutritional factors. Anti-nutritional factors may include alkaloids that may impact palatability and performance, potential for toxicity and the ability to accumulate nutrients such as nitrates.

The unasked question

I opted to save this fifth question to turn the tables: What is one question that should be asked but often is not? In my travels across the state, I often see overgrazing or signs of overgrazing. High prevalence of buttercup in pastures in the spring, excessive ragweed in late summer and early feeding of hay when fall precipitation is limiting, along with other signs.

In many instances, someone buys a piece of land with the intention to have livestock graze the area. Animals are purchased without the knowledge of how many animals the land can support. So my question to you is: How much forage production potential should you expect from your land?

Who measures this? How is it measured? When is it to be measured? These are not-so-simple questions at the heart of establishing the carrying capacity for the grazing land base.

Perhaps if we answered these questions first, the others would not be an issue.

PHOTO: Cattle grazing in a pasture. *Staff photo.*

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