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What Is Our Forage Crop Production Worth?

Carl S. Hoveland

Crop & Soil Science Dept., University of Georgia

Crop production in Georgia is big business and makes a major contribution to the economy. For instance, the approximate value in millions of dollars per year for some of the major crops are: peanut 500, tobacco 160, cotton 500+, corn 100, soybean 80, and wheat 50. That's pretty impressive. Now ask most people, even in agriculture, how the value of pasture and hay crops compares and they usually don't know or reply that these are low value crops and well below that of "real crops" that are worth something. After all, grass is a low value crop unless it is the kind of "grass" that you smoke!

Trying to get information on the value

of forage crop production is not so easy. The Georgia Agricultural Statistics Service does not collect any information on pasture acreage or value. Their reports tell us that Georgia has over 700,000 beef cows and about 100,000 dairy cows. The number of beef stocker cattle on pasture is not mentioned. One interesting bit of information is available on hay production. About 1.5 million tons of hay are produced in Georgia each year, and at a value of \$60/ton, this totals \$90 million. Thus, the value of hay produced in Georgia each year is worth more than either the entire soybean or wheat grain crop! Most of this hay is fed to beef cattle and some to dairy cows but an increasing

amount of hay is being sold to pleasure horse owners. Georgia's horse population of over 80,000 continues to increase over time. Since a considerable amount of hay is imported from other states each year, there is potential for Georgia producers to increase their production of high-quality grass hay for sale to the horse and dairy markets.

Improved perennial pastures include the cool season grasses tall fescue and orchardgrass, and the warm season grasses bahiagrass and bermudagrass. Extension Service estimates are about 2 million acres in Georgia. Most of this pasture is used for beef cows and calves. In addition, there are additional acres of

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these grasses, alfalfa, and perennial peanut harvested mainly for hay or haylage. Winter annual pastures of rye, wheat, oats, or ryegrass total about 600,000 acres. Most of this high-quality pasture is used for stockering beef steers to be sold as feeder cattle to feedlots. Summer annual pastures of pearl millet or sorghum-sudangrass total about 200,000 acres.

If we put some conservative values (including direct and indirect costs) to each of these pasture and hay crop areas, we can develop an estimate of the overall value of forage crop production in Georgia:

2 million acres perennial pasture x \$60/acre =	\$120 million
600,000 acres winter annual pasture x \$100/acre =	60 "
200,000 acres summer annual pasture x \$70/acre =	14 "
1.5 million tons of hay x \$60/ton =	60 "

\$254 million

Totalling up the forage crop values gives an impressive amount of money. Forages are important in our State but are often forgotten as a contributor to the economy. Forages supply most of the nutrients consumed by our beef cows and calves. Likewise, forages are the nutrient source for our growing beef stocker industry. Forages also supply a substantial portion of the dairy cow and pleasure horse diet. The problem is that the value of forages is often forgotten except for hay production where we actually measure production and may sell the output. With pastures, it is easy to take them for granted as the owner may not be aware of the stocking rate and actual output of animal product per acre. Thus, the need for improved pasture management may not be appreciated and the opportunity for greater profit missed. With lower calf prices and higher nitrogen fertilizer prices, there will be a temptation to reduce management inputs. This may be the time to look carefully at low-cost management inputs that can improve efficiency.

Forages provide other benefits to society than providing feed for livestock. Perennial grass sods used as permanent pastures, grassed waterways or terraces, strip cropping, and in rotation with row crops are particularly effective in greatly reducing soil erosion losses. Forages protect watersheds and contribute to improved water quality for urban uses. The poultry industry is highly dependent

on pastures and hayland for disposal of chicken and turkey litter, utilizing the nutrients and preventing contamination of water supplies. Forages also provide feed for wildlife such as deer, turkeys, and rabbits. Finally, pasturelands enhance the beauty of the landscape and add to tourism potential.

Forages are a major crop in Georgia. Research and extension efforts on forages have made major contributions to improving productivity and profitability. Forage-livestock scientists of the University of Georgia and the USDA-ARS are dedicated to continuing that effort and giving assistance to producers. With the severe financial cutbacks in research-extension support expected at the Federal level, we hope that State support can be continued at an adequate level. With no forage commodity group to give strong support for forage research and extension efforts, we depend on livestock producers to give their support.

CARROLL COUNTY LIVESTOCK



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Georgia Top 15 Cattlemarkets 1994

- | | | |
|-----|---------------|--------|
| 1. | Carnesville | 54,139 |
| 2. | Ashburn | 48,028 |
| 3. | Greensboro | 42,652 |
| 4. | Thomasville | 38,090 |
| 5. | Swainsboro | 36,441 |
| 6. | Lanierland | 34,513 |
| 7. | Pulaski Co. | 28,425 |
| 8. | Carrollton | 27,860 |
| 9. | Washington | 27,814 |
| 10. | Jackson | 27,503 |
| 11. | Fitzgerald | 25,028 |
| 12. | Athens | 24,755 |
| 13. | Cumming | 24,200 |
| 14. | Social Circle | 22,123 |
| 15. | Cartersville | 21,077 |

Reported by Federal-State Livestock Market News Service.

1995 Georgia Beef Challenge Loadout

August 28-29 / October 30-31

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