Tips For Summer Pasture Management

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Across Alabama, we have had a cool, wet spring, but finally, as we enter mid-May, our perennial warm-season forages (bermudagrass, bahiagrass, and dallisgrass) are coming to life and greening up. Whether you are in North or South Alabama, warm-season forages are important to keep our cattle grazing year-round. Many times, summer weather can present many challenges to summer grazing. Below are some tips on how to keep your warm-season perennial forages productive throughout the summer months.

1. Soil Test and Fertilize

If you have not soil tested already, it is not too late to do so. We suggest soil testing every year in hay fields and every 2 years in pastures. While nitrogen is an important nutrient to promote forage growth, too little phosphorus, potassium, and a low soil pH will make your forages unhealthy. As a result they will not handle the late summer heat and drought stress. Even under perfect soil fertility, pastures across Alabama will likely still have some slack in productivity at some point in late July/August, but well fertilized forages will bounce back faster than those that were not fertilized.

2. Don't over stock cattle

Behind poor soil fertility, overgrazing or overstocking is the 2nd biggest threat to a productive warm-season pasture. Due to differences in plant physiology, warm-season forages, while lower in forage quality, will out compete other perennial forages in terms of yield potential. Bermudagrass can produce 6 tons of dry matter or more each growing season and bahiagrass 3-4 tons of dry matter. However, as weather patterns change throughout the summer, you will find that forage productivity will also change. As a result, a properly stocked pasture in June, is often overstocked in July or August forcing animals to graze below the recommended height of 3-4 inches which reduces forage persistence.

3. Identify a sacrifice area

It is often a good practice to identify a sacrifice area to feed

cattle in when the forages are not growing due to lack of rain. This area can be a field that needs to be renovated or a dry lot near the barn. Regardless, this area needs to have access to water and the ability to feed hay and/or supplement to cattle while they are off pasture. Having the flexibility to remove animals from pasture for as little as 7-14 days will promote long-term persistence of your warm-season forages, and decrease the recovery time of the pasture once the rains return.

4. Consider incorporating summer annuals into your pasture system

Regardless of your location within the state, adding diversity to your pasture system provides insurance against weather, pests, and other unforeseen problems that can arise during the grazing season. Summer annuals (for example crabgrass) can be planted from late April through the end of June providing flexibility to pasture managers. Since they are annuals, the concern of overgrazing during droughty periods is less, because there is not necessarily a need for them to regrow or build root mass prior to the first frost. Crabgrass in particular is a very versatile summer annual that can be broadcast quite easily and will establish fast. While we don't recommend overseeding into an existing warm-season forage stand, research at the University of Tennessee has shown that crabgrass is a good option to repair damage around winter feeding areas. This can add some extra forage production to an area that would not be very productive otherwise. Converting 5-15% of your farm into an annual rotation (winter and summer) can help you achieve year-round grazing by providing bridge forages during the perennial transition periods (late Fall/winter and early summer).

5. Be Patient

Being patient is probably the hardest thing by far. During spring green up and after a drought-ending rain, we get so excited about all of the green flush we often jump the gun and turn cattle out early. It is difficult to keep feeding expensive hay or supplement when there is green pasture right next door, but waiting 3-5 days or even 1 week will pay off in the long run. First, waiting 1 week reduces the risk of nitrate toxicity in forages that accumulate nitrates during periods of drought. Second, by waiting those extra few days the forages are able to start stockpiling needed nutrients and rebuild their root structures. Roots are the unsung heroes of our pastures and to keep the forages going the rest of the summer, as well as coming back strong next year, we need to make sure they stay strong. Those few days can be a game changer. Hay and feed are expensive, but re-sprigging a bermudagrass field will be a lot more expensive.

For more information about any of your forage and pasture management needs, please visit www.alabamaforages.com or contact your local Regional Extension Agent (www.aces.edu).

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