

Using Forages as a Weed Management Tool

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When many of us hear the term ‘weed control’, our thoughts may go directly to the use of herbicides. While that is certainly an important tool in keeping weeds at bay, it should be one part of a larger system we call an integrated pest management approach or ‘IPM’. Utilizing forages in a way that makes them more competitive against encroaching weeds is a much more effective and sustainable approach rather than relying on a single weed control method.



Figure 1. Overgrazed pastures provide little benefit to cattle and are not competitive against emerging weeds.

Common Problems

Overgrazing

Plants naturally compete for resources like sunlight, water, and nutrients to survive. A large majority of statewide weed issues occur in areas where competition from desirable forages is minimal, stressed, or altogether absent (Fig. 1). If weed populations annually occur in pastures, then grazing management is one of the first practices that could be adapted to maintain the health of forage stands. Whether you choose rotational grazing, strip grazing, or some other variation, the goal should be to allow forages a rest period for recovery.

A good rule of thumb, whether mowing or grazing, is to only remove the top one-third of the plant to maintain plant vigor. Or you may use the ‘rule of hooves,’ and if you can see any part of your cattle’s hooves, then the forage is likely too short.

Poor Fertility

Soil fertility goes hand-in-hand with proper grazing management. Plant health may be compromised by not having the nutrients it needs, or an inadequate soil pH could inhibit nutrients from being absorbed by roots. Weeds, by design, can usually take advantage of these inadequacies in soil health, therefore any possible advantage that can be provided to the desirable forage will pay dividends in weed management. Soil samples are usually no more than about \$10 per sample, which is a relatively small price to pay to help maximize forage potential. Soil lab recommendations usually provide a prescription plan for the fertilizer and lime that is needed both now and for the next two to three seasons. If you’re using chemical weed control in your operation, it’s also a good idea to time fertilizer applications immediately following herbicide applications. With good growing conditions and soil moisture, weeds should be dying as the forage plant growth is increasing.



Final hay cuttings

Hay producers understand that proper soil fertility, pest management, and timely rainfall are just a few keys in maximizing yield and quality. As the end of the summer season approaches it is important to maintain a healthy forage stand as we enter the fall and winter. Remember that the above-ground plant parts, or foliage, act like solar panels for the plant’s system, absorbing and converting sunlight, water, and CO₂ into the carbohydrates the roots need to survive. As daylength gets shorter, these carbohydrates build and are stored in the roots and help plants reemerge during green-up the following spring. Therefore, if forages are cut too short or if the harvest is made too late to allow adequate regrowth, winter survivability and healthy spring recovery is already compromised (Fig. 2).

Simple Solutions

It's easy to look for a quick fix when weeds begin showing up in pastures. They're often unsightly, they reduce forage potential, and many can be toxic to grazing cattle. Control methods such as herbicides and mowing can be a great short-term solution, but these stand-alone options are hardly ever as effective compared to when they are part of a greater forage management plan. So, if you haven't done so already, pull a few soil samples, cross-fence a pasture, and leave a little more regrowth going into winter; your forage and your cattle may look a little better next season.

Figure 2. Harvested warm season forage needs adequate regrowth prior to fall and winter months for healthy recovery in the spring.



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