Winter stockpile payoff comes at calving time

By DUANE DAILEY

FERTILIZER is back in play as a forage management tool. For many producers, fertilizer for grass just didn’t happen last year with the high cost of soil nutrients. With a drop in price, while not cheap, fertilizer should be considered again. Eventually, pastureland needs nutrients.

Careful consideration of timing is still needed, however. And, soil-test results can guide judicious applications.

Rob Kallenbach, University of Missouri Extension forage specialist, sees too much nitrogen applied in spring, when it is least needed. Most years, the natural growth curve of cool-season grasses produces more forage than cows can eat in a timely fashion.

“If you spread both clover seed and nitrogen in the spring, you’re working against yourself,” Kallenbach says. Nitrogen makes the grass growth too competitive for the clover seedlings to survive.

It’s not high tech, but adding legumes is an economical way to add N to pasture for grass growth. Kallenbach calls it “Pennies from heaven.”

From Feb. 15 to March 15 is the time to broadcast seed over grazed pastures to establish frost-seed clovers. Nature works the seed into the soil. Later, until April 15, legumes work the seed into the soil, establishing the seedlings. Kallenbach recommends a seed mix of 5 pounds of red clover with half a pound of white clover per acre. If you want lespedeza, mix in 8 pounds of seed.

Until a pasture contains about 30% legumes, repeat the seedings every spring.

Time of truth

Nitrogen applied in the fall pays for itself by producing stockpile grazing to replace expensive baled hay for winter feeding. An August application before September rains usually pays for itself, many times over.

February is when producers see the payoff of winter stockpile. “Cow condition at time of calving is a good indicator of how the pastures were managed in September, October and November,” Kallenbach says.

Cows grazing on stockpiled from Dec. 15 to Feb. 15 should be carrying fat on their back as they prepare to calve. Good fall grazing, followed by winter stockpile, should give economical winter feeding. Instead of spending money on hay, spend it on fertilizer. That makes economic sense.

“T’s a sure there’s a good correlation between stockpile growth and winter feed costs,” Kallenbach says. “I’d like to run that study.”

The real loss comes if cows are not in good body condition score, around 5 or 6, at calving time. Thin cows are not going to be in shape to rebreed on time.

“Once a cow calves, she can hardly eat enough. She must take fat off of her back to nurse that calf,” he says. Fertilizer applied now can include phosphorus and potassium. Those help grass and clover. These days, it’s hard to take fat off of her back to rebreed on time.

Key Points

- Nitrogen fertilizer in spring can defeat clover addition.
- Waiting to apply N in fall brings bigger dividend.
- Winter grazing of stockpile fescue maintains cows’ BCS.

STOCKPILE PAYOFF: Nitrogen applied in the fall pays for itself by producing stockpile grazing to replace expensive baled hay for winter feeding of cattle.

Alfalfa on every farm

Rob Kallenbach promotes the idea of some alfalfa on every farm. The high-energy, high-protein legume would make a good addition to the winter ration of cow herds now, says the University of Missouri Extension forage specialist. Alfalfa would help the cow and her calf, and improve rebreeding rates. With good feed, fewer cows would fall out of the spring-calving herds.

“Alfalfa can’t be grown everywhere,” Kallenbach says. “But almost every farm has 10% to 15% of the land suitable for alfalfa.” The crop requires fertile, well-drained soils. Alfalfa fields could provide hay early in the season and excellent grazing later.

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