

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Plan ahead for drought-time grazing

By DUANE DAILEY

WHEN the rains stop, grassland farmers must fall back on Plan B. All grazing operations need a drought plan in place, every year — just in case.

"When the rain stops and grass doesn't grow, you are in trouble if you haven't been thinking ahead," says Rob Kallenbach, University of Missouri Extension forage specialist. In Missouri, no one should be surprised by drought.

Cool-season grasses are the first to shut down when rainfall fails — especially if the heat rises. "Warm-season grasses make more efficient use of what moisture is available," Kallenbach says. "Every grazing system should have a warm-season-grass component."

Lots of options are available in Missouri. Switchgrass, big bluestem, indiagrass and eastern gamagrass are the most frequently used native warm-season grasses. In southern Missouri, caucasian bluestem and bermudagrass are also options.

Kallenbach cautions against planting too much warm-season grass. "About 20% of acres in a grazing system is enough; more than that doesn't make economic sense most years. The cool-season grasses provide more flexibility with a growing season over a longer portion of the year."

A cool-season pasture with legumes in the mix will grow longer into a drought, Kallenbach says. Legumes have deep roots, reaching down to draw water out of subsoil that cool-season grass roots can't reach.

Alfalfa in a pasture mix does this best. In deep soils, alfalfa, which has a strong taproot, reaches down 6 feet. Kallenbach has seen alfalfa roots 25 feet deep in the river hill loess soils of northwest Missouri.

Red clover and trefoils have deeper roots than lespedeza. However, all legumes help.

When forage runs out, supplemental feed is needed. The first consideration should be dipping into the winter hay supply. Dry weather is a good time to clean up big bales stored in fencerows.

Grain supplements help get the herd or flock through severe droughts. Missourians have lots of options,

Foraging Ahead

ranging from shelled corn to distillers byproducts to soy hulls.

Grain works best as a supplement, not as a substitute. Going from a strictly forage diet to a straight corn ration, for example, upsets the rumen microbe population, creating acidosis.

A transition strategy helps stretch

the grass supply and reduces the carbohydrate shock to the rumen. That's when regular monitoring of grass paddocks becomes most valuable. "Know what is left in the paddocks," Kallenbach says. "A graph of the grass growing in the paddocks ahead, called a 'grazing wedge,' is really helpful.

"New Zealand graziers have taught us how to use the rising plate meter to measure and graph available forage every week," Kallenbach says. "By

seeing that you have only two weeks of grazing left, you can start adding supplements, hay or grain. With a little extra grain, you can stretch a two-week grass supply into a four-week supply."

One costly hazard of feeding supplement to livestock on paddocks is to continue feeding too long. A transition from supplement to forage should be planned as well.

"With managed grazing, you stretch the time on a paddock," he says.



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WHEN WEATHER turns hot and dry, grazing systems must be in place to keep cows fed. Endophyte-infected fescue causes cattle to head to the pond. Moving cattle to warm-season grasses before fescue becomes toxic helps keep them grazing and producing.