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Using Winter Pasture as a Hay Replacement

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As commodity prices increase and the amount of hay available decreases, many are concerned about feeding their cattle until spring.

Winter pasture, while expensive (around \$120 to \$180 per acre) and traditionally thought of for use with stocker cattle, may fit in your cow management system.

You must make some important decisions before you decide to fire up the planter. First, determine which winter forage is best for your situation. Second, collect good soil samples and have them analyzed. Third, do not skimp on seedbed preparation. Fourth, decide what method you will use to plant your winter pasture. Finally, select a variety with enough available quality seed.

Wheat and cereal rye are the most commonly planted winter forages we see in Oklahoma and Texas, and will be the focus of this article. However, do not count out other options such as oats, triticale and annual ryegrass (but not in pastures where you are growing wheat for dual-purpose). Wheat is better adapted to heavier soils and lasts longer in the spring, while cereal rye is a better fit in sandy soils and usually provides earlier graz-

ing in the fall. Select the forage that best fits your soil and need for forage. A general rule of thumb is to plant 1 acre of winter forage per cow.

Soil testing is important to determine the soil's fertility and pH. If phosphorus or potassium is deficient and/or the soil pH is less than 5.5, expect lower forage yields. Phosphorus and potassium should be applied prior to or near planting. Since it takes time (several weeks) and water for lime to react with the soil and increase the soil pH, make sure to allow enough for it to react. The time of year forage is needed will dictate the timing of the nitrogen application. If your largest need is in the fall, apply the nitrogen either at planting or soon after emergence. For spring forage, apply enough nitrogen to get the crop started at planting or soon after emergence, and the remainder in the spring.

A good seedbed is very important in any planting situation whether it is clean-till, minimum-till or no-till. Do not skimp on this step. Stand establishment is usually best in a weed-free, clean-tilled seedbed. This method is the most expensive and increases the possibility of erosion. To prepare minimum-till seedbeds, suppress existing vegetation by grazing, haying, mowing or treating with



an herbicide, followed by disking and planting. No-till seedbed preparation is similar to minimal-tillage, but without the disking. A word of warning: plant residues or an abundance of weeds can seriously interfere with no-till planting.

Two options for planting are drilling and broadcast seeding. Each has its strengths. Drill planting provides improved plant spacing, lower seeding rates (90 to 120 pounds per acre), better seed to soil contact and proper seeding depth. Disadvantages of a ▶

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drill are slower planting speed and higher equipment costs. Broadcast planting involves spreading the seed over the seedbed surface, then incorporating it into the soil with a disk, culti-packer or other light tillage implement. Broadcasting seed has the advantages of faster seeding, lower equipment cost and the ability

to spread with fertilizer. The disadvantages are higher seeding rate (120 to 150 pounds per acre), lack of depth control, requirement of a second pass for incorporation and a higher risk of stand failure.

Depending on the year, variety selection can be complicated by lack of seed availability. Try to find a

variety that has produced well over several years in university trials in a location similar to your pasture. Using good quality planting seed is just as important as using the right variety. If time permits, have an accelerated aging test conducted to have an indication of the seedling vigor as well as viability. ■