

SOILS

Stockpiled forages reduce hay feeding

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In most operations, hay feeding represents a large portion of a cow's annual maintenance cost. The cost of feeding hay includes much more than

just the production cost or purchase price of the hay. The costs of hauling, storage, rings or feeders, feeding, spoilage, and feeding waste add significantly to the costs of hay feeding. Grazing is the most cost-effective way of harvesting forages, so anything that extends the grazing season and reduces hay feeding tends to make good financial sense.

Perhaps the most common method of extending the grazing season is to stockpile forages in selected pastures. Stockpiling forages simply means allowing growth to accumulate during the growing season to be grazed during the winter months. Any forage has the potential to be stockpiled, but because bermudagrass, native grasses and tall fescue are commonly used in the Southern Great Plains, this article will only address those.

Bermudagrass can make excellent quality stockpiled forage that can maintain its quality into January. Cut the bermudagrass for hay or graze to an approximate 3-inch stubble



height by the middle of August. Apply 50 to 75 pounds actual nitrogen per acre, plus phosphorus and potassium if indicated by soil test, before Sept. 1. Allow the grass to grow until a killing freeze and begin grazing. Assuming favorable weather conditions, the bermudagrass may accumulate up to 2,500 pounds of dry matter per acre during the stockpiling period.

Native grasses can make large quantities of fair to low quality stockpiled forage. Since they tend to be lower quality, it is important to

test standing forages to determine what supplementation is necessary to meet animal nutrient requirements. Cease grazing or haying native grasses by early July and allow them to grow until a killing freeze. This will allow them to replenish their carbohydrate reserves. After the native grasses are dormant, graze them until they reach an approximate 6-inch stubble height. Grazing shorter than the 6-inch stubble height is likely to result in significant crown damage and reduced production the following spring. ►

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For any warm-season grass being stockpiled, the length of time it will maintain its quality will depend on weather conditions. If conditions are cold and dry, stockpiled forages can maintain their quality well into January. If conditions are wet and warm, they will decompose and lose both quality and quantity much faster. In general, native grasses are more resilient in adverse weather conditions than bermudagrass.

Tall fescue, being a cool-season perennial grass, typically does not begin to grow much until September or October. Apply 60 to 90 pounds actual nitrogen per acre, plus phos-

phorus and potassium if indicated by soil test, by Oct. 1. Allow the tall fescue to grow as long as feasible before beginning grazing. For toxic-endophyte-infected tall fescue, delay grazing until January or February to allow the ergovaline levels to drop and reduce risks of fescue toxicosis. Assuming favorable weather conditions, tall fescue may accumulate up to 4,000 pounds of dry matter per acre during the stockpiling and early spring growth periods.

Regardless of which forage is stockpiled, strip grazing will increase utilization efficiency. If cattle have access to entire pastures, significant

losses can occur due to trampling and animal waste.

If a producer has each of these resources plus ryegrass, they could potentially have up to a 12-month grazing season. To accomplish this, they could graze stockpiled bermudagrass and native grasses until January, stockpiled tall fescue from January through April, and ryegrass or other quality cool-season annuals until the warm-season perennial grasses resume growth. Assuming proper stocking rates, good grazing management and favorable weather conditions, stockpiled forages can potentially reduce or even eliminate hay feeding. ■