

Winter Grazing Options

By Andy Luke, field specialist in agronomy

For cattle producers in Missouri, feed represents one of the largest expenses in maintaining a herd. While hay supplies are abundant for many producers this year, a year like 2018 shows that it doesn't take long to deplete the hay storages that we have. Consider delaying hay feeding by grazing stockpiled forages or corn stalks this fall.

Corn stalks are an excellent option for fall and winter grazing. According to research from the University of Nebraska, mature cows with a body condition score of 5 or better should not need protein supplementation if corn stalks are grazed at a proper stocking rate. A good rule of thumb to estimate how many days of grazing a field will provide for 1200-pound non-lactating cows is to divide the corn yield by 3.5. For example, 200-bushel corn will provide around 57 grazing days per acre, which means that each acre will support 57 animals for one day. To put that another way, a 100-acre field would provide grazing for 57 cattle for 100 days.

Fescue is one of the best crops for winter grazing because of its high nutrient content and its waxy cuticle, which allows the fescue to maintain its condition and quality. Because it maintains its quality, fescue should only be grazed after other fall options such as corn stalks have been used. When grazing dormant fescue, maintain a grazing height of 3-4". If grazed to 2" or less, spring regrowth will be slowed. Also, the lower 2" contains high levels of ergovaline, the toxin responsible for fescue toxicosis. As the winter progresses, ergovaline concentrations will decline in stockpiled fescue.

Alfalfa is another crop that can be grazed after it has gone dormant. Prior to a frost, alfalfa has a tendency to cause bloat. However, after a frost occurs and the alfalfa goes dormant, the leaves will dry up and bloat concerns are reduced. To prevent bloat from becoming an issue, only turn out full cattle onto alfalfa fields and allow access to dry hay or corn stalks in addition to the alfalfa. Removing cattle when soils are wet or muddy will help keep the alfalfa stand in good shape for future years.

Of course, with any winter forage options, adequate fences and access to water are essential. Electric fence is effective as long as cattle are trained to respect the fence. Cattle released into new forage areas that are unfamiliar with the electric fence are likely to cause problems. Although inconvenient, water can be hauled throughout the winter. Mature cattle will drink 8-12 gallons of water per day through the winter months.

Utilizing fall and winter grazing options is a great way to reduce one of the largest expenses associated with cattle. Adverse weather can always impact the number of available grazing days, so have a plan in place to provide feed when the weather does turn bad. To ensure your winter grazing options are meeting your cattle's dietary needs, contact your local University of Missouri Extension Livestock Specialist.

(written 10/30/2020)