MANAGING FORAGE STANDS FOR LARGE LIVESTOCK OPERATIONS

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Introduction

Yield, quality, and persistence . . . fundamental areas of perennial forage crop production that must be managed to be successful. These areas of forage management are like a three-legged stool. If the three legs (yield, quality, and persistence) are managed, the stool (forage production system) will be in balance. However, if one leg is weak or worn, dire consequences can follow. It is not a good experience to fall off the stool.

What are important decisions regarding the establishment, management, and harvest of forages that will make a difference in the provision of a high yielding and high quality feedstuff? What management strategies should be utilized to keep perennial forages productive and profitable? Is the decision-making process just a matter of magnitude, or are there different skills that are a must when managing forages for large livestock operations? I will share my opinions on what it takes to keep the forage stool in balance.

Be Timely

For the production system to flourish it is imperative to understand the negative consequences of poor planning and procrastination.

- Plan the crop rotation well in advance so herbicide residue concerns are not an issue when rotating to the forage crop.
- Test soil for pH and nutrient levels at least six months in advance of the forage seeding so limestone can be applied to correct a low pH problem. Fertilize to reduce the concern of a nutrient deficiency in advance of a seeding.
- Seed at the desired time for the crop being sown. Example: An alfalfa seeding in mid-September and mid-May could result in a less than desirable stand.
- Scout fields for the presence of pests (insects, weeds, and disease) so the concern of the pest can be managed before major crop loss occurs. Weekly scouting of each field is recommended and the crop in a field should be monitored very closely if the concern is approaching the economic threshold.
- Watch the weather so practices of most importance can be completed before rainfall limits field activities.
- Harvest the crop at the proper stage so desired quality is achieved and persistence of the stand is not compromised.
- Test the harvested forage for nutrient composition well in advance of purchase and use by livestock. Use the results to make improvements in the production system, as a marketing tool, and to develop cost-effective rations.

Use Resources Wisely

Evaluate what is limiting production and profit and reallocate resources to make improvements.

- Develop a nutrient management plan so proper amounts of fertilizer, organic and inorganic, are applied at the preferred time of year.
- Cross-train employees or hire extra labor so most critical activities can be accomplished first or two separate procedures are making progress towards completion. Example: Many times there is a conflict of hay harvest and corn or soybean planting in May because wet weather has slowed progress with farming operations. Is it possible to have recently retired farmers on-call if needed?

- Evaluate the effectiveness of custom-hired operations versus owning the equipment and completing the task within the full-time employee base. How much control is desired in determining when the crop management task is completed?
- Review rates of products used to see if there are inputs that could be reduced. Examples: Is it really necessary to seed 20 pounds of alfalfa seed per acre? Is it justified to apply the high rate of the pesticide for the pest being controlled?
- Evaluate alternative means of pest control. Examples: Is an improved potato leafhopper-resistant alfalfa variety an alternative to being less than timely with scouting and the cost of an insecticide to control the insect pest? Does a Roundup Ready alfalfa variety provide a benefit in weed control long term?
- Upgrade equipment that is not reliable or improperly sized for the task to be completed in timely fashion.

Keep Good Records

- Develop a database of records so they can be utilized when crop production issues occur and to track the productivity of a crop within fields over time.

Have a Team of Professionals

- Develop a list of professional contacts in the region to seek input when needed. Understand that crop management advice may not be similar in different regions of the country because of environment differences; be selective in developing your team.

Successful management of the forage enterprise requires managers to be timely, use resources wisely, keep good records, and have a team that functions with routine procedures as well as challenging issues.