

Keys to forage profitability

Forage crops play a significant role in Kentucky, but farmers have yet to fully realize the potential.

More than half the cost of producing beef is associated with growing forage for animals. Beef cattle receive nearly 80 percent of their nutrition from forage.

While many factors can affect animal performance, on most farms nutrition is the primary limiting factor, said Garry Lacefield, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service forage specialist. So, the quality of forage a farmer produces has a big impact on the potential for making a profit.

Some key steps need to be taken to develop a profitable forage program, said Lacefield.

"Our forage quality in Kentucky falls short of where it is capable of being in many situations, especially our hay," he said.

Lacefield and other UK extension specialists discussed forages during a recent symposium at the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association's convention.

Farmers must develop an appreciation of forage crops. Top producers have a great appreciation of forages, Lacefield said.

Producers also should know what forage options are available and what would work with their soil and climatic conditions. It is important to soil test and amend the soil as needed, and to know what species would work best and select one. Variety selection is also a factor; producers should select ones at the top of the variety trial lists.

"In Kentucky we have the best of both worlds," Lacefield said. "We can grow cool season grasses, cool season legumes plus warm season grasses and warm season legumes. We can grow more than 45 different forage species. Yet only about eight species make up 80 to 90

percent of the overall feed supply."

Producers should use legumes where feasible. These species offer some unique and valuable attributes to grass-only pastures. If legumes can be established into grass pastures, they can improve yield, improve quality, take advantage of those that fix nitrogen and, depending on which legumes used, can improve summer production, Lacefield said.

Pests need to be controlled or avoided. These are thieves that can steal nutrients, water, light and space from forage plants. Resistant varieties are the best defense against plant diseases, and fields should be monitored for insects so that damage can be minimized by insecticide applications as needed.

Optimizing forage utilization is a major emphasis in Kentucky. "I know of no area in Kentucky in beef cattle

production that we have a greater opportunity than improving our overall grazing systems," Lacefield said.

Farmers should also minimize the amount of stored feed. Improved grazing programs that would extend the grazing time can help reduce the amount of hay needed.

It is also important to reduce hay losses while in storage. Farmers spend a lot of time and money preparing hay, yet it is estimated hay and feeding losses cost U.S. producers \$3 billion, he said.

Hay losses can be reduced by reducing or eliminating hay/soil contact and being placed in areas that dry quickly after a rain. Extra care for high quality hay such as covering with a tarp or storing inside may be used.

As farmers plan and manage their forage program, the most important thing is for them never to stop trying to improve, Lacefield said.

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