Farm Views

Using Summer Annual Forage Grasses to Stretch Pastures in a Dry Year

Summer annual grasses are used for summer pasture, green chop, hay, silage, and winter pasture. Annual grasses most often used for forage in Nebraska are sudan grass, hybrid sudan grass, sorghum-sudan grass hybrids, and forage sorghums. Foxtail millet and pearl millet are used occasionally. Each of these grasses has unique growth characteristics that require proper management for optimum production.

Some of the desirable characteristics of summer annuals are rapid growth (especially in mid-season), excellent drought resistance, and good response to fertilizer and water. Alkali soils can reduce yields considerably, but plants will tolerate a moderate amount of salinity. They are well adapted to most areas of the state and grow rapidly following planting in late May or June. They provide good growth from mid-July through August, and then moderate growth until stopped by fall frost.

Sorghum-sudan grass hybrids produce approximately the same amount of feed as sudan grass when used for pasture. When used for green chopped forage, yields of sorghum-sudan grass hybrids exceed sudan grass or forage sorghum. Forage sorghums are usually best for silage. Making sorghum-sudan grass into hay can be difficult because drying is slow.

Sudan Grass

True sudan grasses have fine stems, till extensively when conditions permit, and can regrow rapidly. Thus, they are more suited to pasture than other types of sorghum. Piper and Wheeler are popular varieties in Nebraska. Piper has low prussic acid content and is generally regarded as safe to graze. Wheeler has a slightly higher level of prussic acid, but it presents little danger to

grazing livestock.

Hybrid Sudan Grass

Hybrid sudan grasses are crosses among true sudan grass strains that are available primarily as commercial varieties. They are similar to true sudan grass varieties, but yield slightly more in a three-cut green chop or hay system. Their prussic acid content is generally between the Piper sudan grass and sorghum-sudan grass hybrids.

Sorghum-Sudan Grass Hybrids

Sorghum-sudan grass hybrids are the most numerous of the various types of summer annual grasses. Most of these are available as commercial hybrids. They are high producing forage grasses, but more than 50 percent of their yield comes from their stems. Their rate of regrowth after repeated clippings or grazing is lower than sudan grass. Thus, sorghum-sudan grass hybrids are best suited for green chop.

Cattle consuming some sorghum-sudan grass hybrids sometimes gain weight or milk less than those consuming other summer annuals, apparently due to a lower energy content. When these hybrids are cut at immature stages, quality is higher, but yields are much lower.

Sudan grass, sorghum-sudan grass hybrids, and forage sorghum pastures are not recommended for horses because kidney ailments may develop.

Forage Sorghum

Forage sorghums are usually tall growing and mature late in the growing season. Often called "cane," "sweet sorghum," or "sorgo" forage sorghums often have sweet and juicy stems, and relatively small grain heads.

Forage sorghums usually yield more silage dry matter per acre than dryland corn and will yield similarly to corn under irrigation. However, yields of TDN (energy) per acre are usually lower from forage sorghums than corn.

Grazing of forage sorghums is not recommended. They usually contain much higher levels of prussic acid than other summer annual grasses and can be dangerous to graze even when plants are completely headed, especially when young shoots are present. Forage sorghums can be cut for hay, although their stems dry very slowly after cutting.

Foxtail Millet

Foxtail millet has relatively coarse stems and is used primarily as an emergency hay or silage crop, especially in dry years. It is more dependable than other summer annuals on light, sandy soils and will usually produce higher hay yields than other summer annuals following a late planting in the western two-thirds of Nebraska.

Foxtail millet does not root securely into the soil during early growth and is slow to regrow following grazing. Thus, it is not recommended for grazing except in an emergency.

Pearl Millet

Pearl millet has become increasingly popular for grazing in recent years due to the development of commercial varieties adapted to Nebraska. It is very leafy, regrows well after grazing, yields similar to sudan grass, and does not cause prussic acid poisoning.

For more information, refer to NebGuide G74-171 "Summer Annual Forage Grasses." This can be accessed on the web at: http://ianrwww.unl.edu/pubs/range/g171.htm. (TD)

SNAP Aiming for Late Summer Start Date

The Southeast Nebraska Area Producers (SNAP) continue to make progress toward a late summer start date. Since the last update in the April NEBLINE, the SNAP board of directors has elected a slate of officers with Herschel Staats, Lincoln – Chair; Marlan Johnson, Eagle – Vice-chair; Ken Iverson, Papillion – Secretary; and Burdette Piening, Lincoln – Treasurer.

USDA Rural Development , Nebraska Cooperative Development Center, Nebraska Department of Ag, Nebraska Farm Bureau, and others have lent valuable assistance to the group throughout its history. Tom Dorn, extension educator, has served as advisor to the group since July 1999. Most recently, leading the effort to develop a five-year business plan.

SNAP has filed Articles of Incorporation as a non-stock, non-profit cooperative with the Nebraska Secretary of State. Other papers have been filed with the Nebraska Department of Banking and Finance enabling SNAP to begin accepting memberships. Membership fees, set at $250, are considered low for a non-stock cooperative. Start-up funds have been secured in the form of three grants totaling $33,000. Continuing operating and overhead costs will be covered by assessing a small fee on bushels of grain contracted.

SNAP Southeast Nebraska Area Producers

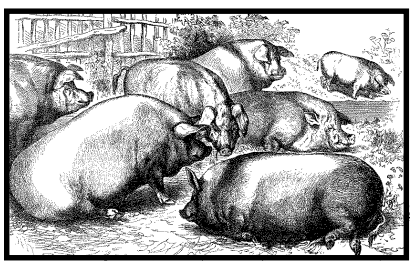
SNAP's immediate goals are to build a membership of over 100 producers by the end of the year and negotiate contracts for production of over 10,000 acres of Identity Preserved grains in 2001. To receive a Member Information Statement, call Tom Dorn, 402-441-7180; e-mail: tdorn1@unl.edu or Herschel Staats, 402-483-5673; e-mail: hstaats@alltel.net. (TD)

Hog Prices

One fact about the hog business which has long been evident to producers is hog prices do not go up with inflation. Whereas, the price of many items are constantly moving to new record levels, this is not the case for hogs, or most other farm products. True, the runaway inflation of the 1970's did permanently lift hog prices; but the mild inflation since then has not been able to further raise the price of hogs. Barrows and gilts averaged $44.61 per hundred weight at the terminal markets in the second half of the 1970's, $47.17 in the 1980's and $44.05 in the 1990's. The record high for the annual average price of barrows and gilts at the terminal market is $55.07 per hundred weight which was set 18 years ago in 1982. The second highest year was 1990 at $54.55 per hundred weight.

Using the consumer price index to adjust for inflation, the annual average price of barrows and gilts were record low in 1999, breaking the old record low set in 1998, which broke the record set in 1994. Although this year's run-up in prices will forestall any new record, I'm confident there are more years of inflation adjusted record low prices in front of us.

Fortunately for producers, the cost of production has also resisted the forces of inflation. According to the Iowa State University swine records, since 1980 the highest annual average



cost of producing barrows and gilts in Iowa, farrow to finish, operations was $48.94 per hundred weight in 1996, the second highest was $48.33 per hundred weight in 1983, and the third highest was $47.69 in 1981. Adjusted for inflation, the cost of raising hogs was record low in 1999, breaking the old record low set in 1998, which broke the record low set in 1995.

Why hasn't inflation pushed-up the cost of producing hogs? Two reasons: feed and efficiency. The biggest cost item in hog production is feed, a farm product which has remained largely unaffected by inflation. Adjusted for inflation, 1999 corn prices were one-third of 1980.

The production efficiency on America's swine farms improves annually. ISU, farrow to finish, records indicate pounds of feed divided by pounds of gain averaged 3.9 pounds in 1981 and 3.5 pounds in 1999. Feeder to market death loss averaged seven percent in 1981 and 6.2 percent in 1999. Pigs weaned per female per year averaged 13.6 in 1981 and 16.8 in 1999. Hours of labor per hundred weight produced averaged 0.78 in 1981 and 0.49 in 1999. As long as farm productivity outraces inflation, deflated hog prices will continue their downward trend.

Source: Ron Plain, Iowa State University (ISU) Swine Economics Report. (TD)