

Managing Native Grass Forages

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Extending the Grazing Season for Native Warm-season Grasses

Many producers ask me what can be done to extend the grazing season for native grass forages. In the Mid-South, native warm-season grasses can reasonably be grazed from late April through mid-September, about 140 days. By comparison, tall fescue can be productively grazed for about 100 days in spring (late March – June) and perhaps 60 days in the fall (late September – late November).

During summer, availability of grazing can be manipulated simply by planning rest periods that allow quality forage to accumulate. As the season progresses, the length of that rest period will go from as little as one week (mid-May – mid-June) to perhaps three weeks or longer (August). With proper grazing management – leaving ample canopy and vigorous, vegetative swards – prior to this rest period, high quality forage will accumulate as the stand rests.

Thus, if forage is desired for early August, a rest period in the second half of July should be planned. For late August or early September grazing, rest during the first three weeks of August should suffice. With rotational grazing, such rests are easily provided. Be sure the rest period is long enough to accumulate adequate forage, but not so long that the grasses begin to produce seedheads and lose quality.

During the dormant-season, “stockpiled” material can be used to extending grazing seasons. This is a common practice for Western stockmen managing native rangelands. An ongoing study at UTIA is evaluating performance of bred heifers grazing dormant native grasses during January-early April. To date, with a modest protein supplement, heifer pregnancy retention and calf birth weights have been comparable to those on stockpiled tall fescue.

A second alternative for extending grazing seasons is to over-seed dormant pastures with cool-season annuals. This is a common practice further south for bermudagrass growers. While we only have limited data on this approach for natives, it is clear that winter annuals can be successfully drilled into dormant stands. Furthermore, grazing during the dormant season will not harm the native grasses.

The key therefore, is to be diligent in removing the winter annual by early/mid-April to minimize competition with the warm-season grasses. This is the same challenge bermudagrass growers’ face when over-seeding winter annuals. Winter annuals that remain through late April can result in reduced warm-season grass production and thinned stands. For this reason, annual ryegrass should NOT be used to over-seed natives. Instead, cereal rye or brassicas should be used as they will mature early and thus, minimize competition with early growth of natives.

Manipulating the timing and duration of rest periods during summer, grazing stockpiled material, or over-seeding winter annuals are all approaches that can be used to provide extended grazing in native grass pastures. Combined with the many benefits that native grass pastures provide during summer (e.g., exceptional drought tolerance, low input, high yield, and high quality forages), natives offer a tool that can make important contributions to your forage program.