Guide to Developing Profitable Pastures

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Like any investment, careful thought and consideration must go into the goals you have for the return you are seeking on your pasture. Are you trying to increase animal head count, decrease food costs or develop more grazing land? Do you want to develop replacement heifers, wean heavier calves or background more steers? These and many other questions should be carefully considered – and put in writing – when creating your pasture plan.

To assist you in this task, Pennington has forage specialists who can help you evaluate your needs and create a solution for your specific requirements. The checklists below can also help you collect data and record your needs so that you can easily evaluate your pasture plan.

Selecting the Proper Seed

In addition to specific seed characteristics, you should also evaluate your seed partner and the service they will provide to you.

·Evaluate and understand what type of service you will receive after the sale. Talk with other farmers about their experiences and ask your potential seed vendor for a list of references.

·Ensure that the seed you are selecting is certified.

·Ask your potential seed vendor for any available research and farm trial data.

·Make sure the seed you are selecting is adaptable to the climate and soil in your region.

·Evaluate the longevity of the seed and how it will perform for permanent pastures.

·Understand the nutritional value, the palatability, and grazing tolerance.

·If used in mixtures, make sure the seed you select will be compatible with other species.

·Evaluate disease and insect resistance and tolerance.

Creating your Successful Pasture

Like any plan or set of goals, putting things down in writing will help you periodically review your plan and evaluate how you are doing against the goals you have established. Other steps include periodic soil testing, weed identification and control and functional pasture design.

·Write down your goal for each pasture and develop your plan to achieve that goal.

·Conduct soil tests and add fertility based on the test results.

·Identify weeds and create a strategy for weed control.

·Add a legume such as white or red clover, alfalfa or lespedeza.

·Design cross fencing for water, feed and shade flexibility.

·Adjust stocking rate to harvest available forage in short grazing periods (1-3 days) and then rest (21-30 days).

·Understand forage yield and when your pasture will produce forage.

Grazing Management and Optimization

It is extremely important to evaluate seasonal feeding controls, maximize forage yield with a few simple steps and understand the importance of herd movement for increased forage production.

·Cull old cows, poor-producing cows and open cows. It takes just as much feed to over-winter a cull cow as it does a producing cow.

·Ensure that your cows start the winter season in good body condition. Throughout the season, ensure that they have enough nutrition to successfully calve, rebreed and wean heavy calves.

·Do not eliminate necessary inputs for short-term savings. This may actually result in increased costs later.

·Evaluate your replacement heifers. Determine whether it is more economical to feed them through the winter or to replace them next spring.

·Feed dry cows, cows with calves and lactating heifers separately.

·Test your hay and balance a ration that is consistent with animal needs.

·Look for local sources of harvest residues or food processing by-products to feed.

·To reduce waste, incorporate hay feeder rings or unroll bales and feed under a temporary fence.

·Feed supplements away from feeder rings to adequately distribute cattle loafing areas.

·Strip graze stockpiled tall fescue as a protein source for dry, pregnant cows. Strip grazing reduces trampling damage and increases utilization.

·To provide maximum nutrition for spring-calving cows, feed your best hay last to ensure adequate nutrition during the critical period between winter feeding and spring grazing.

·Leave at least 4 inches of residue after grazing. This will produce nearly one ton more forage per acre per year.

·Annual grasses should reach a height of 8 to 10 inches before being grazed. Leaves should be left at a length of 3 to 4 inches. Allowing grazing any closer than this will cause poor yields and increase winter kill.

·Unroll round bales on spring pasture to increase hay consumption and slow the rate of passage of succulent spring growth.

·Frequent cow movement for top grazing of spring growth is important in lengthening the period of quality forage production.

It is easy to be tempted to just reduce costs short-term without evaluating the long-term economic effects on your pasture. Consider this example: If you purchase a less expensive, lower performing seed variety, you may save $50.00 an acre. But, if you forfeit 75 lbs. in weaning weights per year, you'll lose nearly $10,000 per acre over the life of a 15 year stand.

Make sure that you carefully consider your plan, write down your goals and the steps to achieve those goals, evaluate ALL costs and obtain as much information as you can from your potential seed providers. Following these few simple steps will help you develop a profitable pasture!