GRAZING NEWSLETTER

DFA Grazing

Fall 2012

Mike's Paddock

Mike Lamborn
DFA Grazing
Consultant

Droughts happen. Whether they are moderate, severe or extreme, droughts present the grazing-dependent farmer with grass/forage shortfalls. Depending on the location of your operation, you no doubt have had experiences with one of these three types this year. In some cases, you may be dealing with this situation for the second year in a row. So much for the saying "lightning never strikes in the same place twice." If you want to look on the bright side of things, every day that it doesn't rain, is closer to the day that it's going to. This may sound optimistic, but if you're a grazier, it's the way you have to think.

The current drought has been debilitating to the nation's corn and soybean crop, and there are all kinds of horror stories being bandied about what the future holds in regard to purchased feed costs. The reality of the U.S. dairy industry is that there are very few dairy farmers in the country who can do without purchasing at least some feed/concentrates because the climate simply dictates it. In most cases, forage and how you manage it is going to dictate profit margins and business sustainability. Now more than ever, forage establishment and management is critically important as fall approaches.

Fall is the time that farmers should be thinking about what portion of the grazing platform can be devoted to cool season annuals. Serious graziers use these annuals to shore up the shoulders of the perennial grazing season. Oats, cereal rye, annual ryegrass, crimson clover and turnips (to name a few) are included in this category. Proper management of seasonal annuals can provide highly nutritious and digestible forages for lactating dairy cows at a fraction of the cost of purchased concentrates. A rule of thumb is that grazable forage can be produced for about 10 cents a pound dry matter vs. 20 cents a pound dry matter for purchased feed.

Establishing time lines is critical with annuals. The advantage of cool season annuals planted in early fall is that they can provide valuable fall and early winter grazing, when perennials are shutting down. Annuals can be sown either in a cultivated seed bed or no-tilled into existing pasture. With improvements in no-till machine technology, and if paddock preparation is done right, you can produce quality forage stands without the cultivation costs.

If you are in the North, these fields will be run out and all that needs done is hard grazing just prior to drilling. If you can't graze hard, clipping the pasture as low as possible will produce the desired result. If you are in a pasture re-development program that requires leveling, cultivation is the answer. Consider planting these fields in a cool season annual followed by a warm season forage crop such as BMR sorghum-sudan and then sowing permanent pasture the following fall. This double-crop system will result in little, if any, re-germination of weeds and undesirable grasses.

If you're farming in the commercial environment, spraying before planting with Roundup or glyphosate 360 will be hugely beneficial. Spraying gives emerging seedlings the best chance at survival without competition from established grasses.

September 21 Conference Call:

Prepare for the Next Growing Season

Mike Lamborn, DFA Grazing consultant, will host a conference call from 11 a.m. to noon CST, Friday, September 21.

During the call, Mike will discuss getting ready for the next growing season and answer your questions.

To participate in the call, dial 1-800-230-1951 and when prompted enter the access code 260018.

USDA Drought Assistance Resources

The 2012 Farm Bill, which is currently being discussed in Congress, contains important disaster assistance programs to help producers dealing with weather-related disasters. While those programs are currently expired, and awaiting Congressional reauthorization, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and other related agencies have changed or relaxed current programs to help with the drought. For example, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program contracts have been modified to allow for prescribed grazing, livestock watering facilities, water conservation and other conservation activities in drought-stricken areas. For a listing of these recent announcements, visit the resources page at www.dfagrazing.com.

Mike's Paddock, cont.

Grazing management of established perennial pastures is absolutely critical in the fall. In fact, correct fall management of established pastures virtually sets up the following growing season. Overgrazing cool season perennials depletes valuable plant nutrient reserves and leaves parent plants exposed to weather extremes. In a worst case scenario, root formation will slow or stop, and in the following spring these "tillers" will grow slower and have fewer roots to support themselves. Older tillers will look almost dead (not the case), but they play a vital role in providing winter protection to newer, establishing tillers. The only exception to this grazing rule is if you are going to stockpile tall fescue for winter dry cow feed. Stockpiled tall fescue has an amazing ability to recover after hard winter grazing. The secret to this is that this crop has been closed up and fertilized, and won't be touched until late November or early December. Root reserves are already stored in the plant prior to grazing.

In the South, fall rain and moderate temperatures will still produce useful amounts of feed from warm season perennials such as Bermudagrass and Tifton 85. No-tilling annuals into these pastures will produce good quantities and quality of forage, and can be delayed somewhat to utilize existing growth. Don't compromise the annual grass program for the sake of late fall perennial production. Obviously, the later these annuals are planted, the later you are going to be grazing them.

Fall also is the time to do soil tests to determine soil nutrient levels. It is best to apply lime to adjust soil ph during this season, if needed. Potassium and c. Phosphorous levels can be addressed as well, but I've always felt that potassium is most useful in spring to boost clover production. At any rate, don't scrimp on fertilizer. An adequate soil nutrient profile provides the foundation for next year's grass/forage production. Fertilizer cost is sometimes a bitter pill to swallow but don't get caught thinking you can do without it. As farmers become more and more reliant on pasture/forage milk production, the statement should be ,"I can't afford NOT to."

Fall also is a good time for strategic applications of nitrogen. Annual forage production depends on it. While nitrogen is deemed expensive, it is still the key to getting the most out of grass/forage production — especially annuals. Consider urea at $600 per ton spread. One ton of urea contains 920 units of nitrogen at 65 cents per unit. If growth conditions are right, one could expect a fall growth result of 8 pounds of dry matter per unit of nitrogen. Simple math shows 1 pound of dry matter produced for 8.1 cents. That's cheap feed when you can't get parlor ration for less than 20 cents per pound. Fall applications of nitrogen do not need to be any heavier than 50 units. You will get more growth with heavier applications, but the law of diminishing returns comes into play with these heavier doses.

Considering the cost of feed and the drought conditions that most have experienced, all culling of cows should be finished. As milk production progresses from late summer into fall, it is only going to become more expensive to produce as a result of tighter pasture rotations and decreased forage intake. Suffice to say, there is no place on the farm for an open cow that isn't producing her feed bill.

Don't forget the replacement heifers. In times of feed/forage shortages, it is easy to neglect the nutritional needs of heifers. Genetically, these youngsters are the herd's future and are technically better than their mothers. It is imperative that they are encouraged to grow to their genetic potential and, in turn, be highly productive cows.

It has been a tough season for most, but brighter skies lay ahead.

Cheers,

Mike