

South Dakota Rancher®

Management tips for South Dakota livestock and grassland managers

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Grazing CRP

Many drought stressed counties recently received permission to graze and hay CRP acres, and many other counties have applied, hoping that it will relieve some of the feed shortage due to the drought.

Grazing CRP however, can be a double edged sword. First of all, drought conditions have stunted fresh grass growth and the old, dead growth that tends to accumulate in CRP fields lowers forage quality considerably. Low forage quality during peak lactation can have long-term consequences as milking cows may not be able to select a diet capable of maintaining sufficient body condition through the remainder of the breeding season and into the winter.



Photo: Eric M. Mousel

Managing cow nutritional requirements and forage quality is critical to the successful use of CRP forage. One possible strategy may be to early wean calves to reduce cow nutritional requirements

for lactation. Once cows are bred, they can rough it through the rest of the summer on low quality forages.

If lactating cows are going to be grazing CRP, supplementing protein to increase forage digestibility and maintain intake levels will likely be necessary to successfully utilize these low quality forages without unnecessarily running off a lot of body condition. Feeding about a half-pound of protein per head per day in the form of cake, soybean meal, protein licks, etc. should be adequate.

In some situations, ranchers may find that utilizing CRP as grinding hay is a much more efficient option than grazing. Even if CRP fields are fenced and water is available, converting these low quality forages into useable grazing can be costly and time consuming. When utilizing CRP forages, remember to match cow requirements with forage to quality to avoid problems later this year.

Grazing Drought Stressed Corn

Pastures in some areas of the state have dried up as a result of the drought and many corn fields won't be far behind. To salvage your corn crop, provide extra feed for livestock, and minimize damage to drought stressed pastures, grazing corn may be an option.

Drought stressed corn certainly can be green chopped or cut for silage, however, grazing may be the cheapest and safest way to use this corn. Corn, without the grain, is similar in quality to other summer annual grasses like sudangrass and millet.

Corn can accumulate a substantial amount of nitrates in dry years so be sure to send in a forage

sample to the lab and have it tested for nitrates. If testing indicates high nitrate levels, cutting corn for silage may be a better alternative so it can be blended in with other roughages to lower the nitrate concentrations.



If you decide to graze your corn, be sure to use a strip fence to graze the field in strips rather than just turning them loose. Provide enough corn in each strip to feed cows for two or three days. Growing cattle will do much better if the strip fence is moved daily.

Dry weather may have ruined your corn crop, but don't let it be a total loss. Grazing corn can be an attractive source of feed for livestock.

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