

South Dakota Rancher®

Management tips for South Dakota livestock and grassland managers

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Start Planning Year Round Forage Programs

Feed cost savings by extending the grazing season in spring, fall, and winter are welcomed by most every producer. However, having additional forages ready to go when they are needed takes some additional planning. Now that spring is on the horizon, planning your forage program for the upcoming growing season should start pretty soon.

Planting cool-season cereals is a great way to start the grazing season. Using oats, rye, or triticale can provide extra high quality forage that can be grazed early and possibly used later for hay if good growing conditions support some regrowth.



Winter rye. Photo: KSU

Flash grazing cool-season pastures early can get cows off winter feed a little earlier, but grazing must be light and quick, overgrazing early will hurt your pastures for the rest of the summer. You also must plan for a shift in forage distribution for the remainder of the grazing season as a little less forage may be available at the end of the summer.

Drilling legumes into grass pastures this spring can improve animal performance as well as provide extra nitrogen to increase pasture yield over the longer-term.



Turnips. Photo: A. Smart

Planting warm-season annual forages such as sudangrass in May or June can provide a lot of extra feed during mid- to late-summer when pastures are getting short and forage quality gets poor. Prussic acid and nitrate poisoning is always a concern and should be monitored closely before turn-out.

Is grazing some standing corn an option for this summer or fall? Dry summers often lead to producers considering grazing corn. If so, have fencing materials available so fields can be strip grazed. Watch for nitrate levels and founder on high corn grain diets. Acclimate livestock to high corn grain diets before turn-out.

Planting turnips, oats, and/or rye in July or August can provide some great fall grazing when summer pastures run out. However, if it's a dry summer watch nitrate levels closely.

Cornstalks are a staple of many fall and winter grazing programs in the eastern and central parts of the state. Consider leasing arrangements for cornstalks now so fencing and water arrangements can be made ahead of time if necessary.

Before grazing begins this spring, is winter grazing going to be a part of your forage program this year? If so, which pastures are going to be stockpiled to keep cows off winter feed for a few extra months? What is the cheapest source of crude protein supplementation that fits into the overall program?

Although low cost production is always emphasized and obviously encouraged, hay is still going to be a part (hopefully a small part) of any forage program. If we have another relatively dry summer, hay supplies could be tight. Following the mid-summer hay season is a good time to evaluate hay availability for winter feeding programs and decisions need to be made if or how much hay will need to be purchased for the winter. Don't wait until November or December to decide hay needs to be purchased. You will pay dearly for it then.

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