

Alternative Forage Options for Drought Stricken Areas

Southeast Kansas (SEK) experienced drought through late summer and fall in 2022. This affected pasture health, forage yields, and hay prices, causing some producers to worry if there is enough forage to maintain herd numbers. In this article we will lay out a few forage alternatives to consider.

Many tall fescue pastures in SEK went dormant early last summer, and never broke dormancy, leaving producers concerned if the fescue is dead. While it is difficult to predict recovery, we know stand health will be poor this spring. In some cases, spring oats can be drilled into fescue stands to provide additional forage. Using low seeding rates and a no-till drill, oats make a great companion crop to compensate for marginal fescue production.

Winter wheat can be used as a dual-purpose crop. Producers graze the stand early in the spring, and then pull cattle off to have a harvestable wheat crop. Winter wheat can be grazed until the first hollow stem stage without impacting yield potential. Research has shown a zero percent yield impact from grazing prior to the first hollow stem, and then a two percent yield loss each day the wheat is grazed after first hollow stem. First hollow stem is identifiable by splitting the main tiller on the wheat plant and locating the developing wheat head. This stage begins when the developing wheat head is approximately .59 inches above ground, roughly the diameter of a dime.

Winter wheat can also be used solely as a forage crop with the ability to rotate to a summer crop. In this system, wheat can be grazed until planting time. Wheat can be terminated via tillage or herbicides.

For producers who did not plant winter wheat in the fall there are several spring planted cereal crops that make excellent grazing options. Cereal rye is a cold-hardy, fast growing cereal crop that will produce a large amount of forage quickly. Cereal rye is most often planted in the fall, but in SEK late winter plantings can also provide adequate stands. Cereal rye is best served as a silage crop because it matures quickly, but it will also give producers the earliest grazing option.

Spring oats is the next earliest forage option. Spring oats can be planted as early as February 15th in a warm and dry winter, or as late as March 10th in a cold and wet winter. Oats will freeze kill, so plan to plant after the last threat of a freeze. Spring oats will not produce tillers, so yield potential will not be as high as other cereal crops. Grazing should begin when plants are 6 - 8 inches tall and cease when plants are 2 - 3 inches tall to ensure regrowth.

For producers looking to get more forage from their spring crop, spring triticale can be a great option. Spring triticale will mature later in the season than cereal rye and spring oats, so it is not recommended if producers want to rotate to corn in that field. Double-cropped soybeans would be an option in SEK following triticale. Spring triticale has many hybrids that are designed for different forage systems, but triticale is best served as a hay/silage crop.

With a grim outlook on spring pasture health, producers may need to look beyond their typical spring grazing options. Cereal crops can be an inexpensive and high-quality forage to fill a need while tall fescue pastures recover from last year's drought. For more information on using alternative forages, contact Chad Guthrie, crop production and forage management agent, at any Southwind Extension District office.