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Establish year-round grazing, specialist says

By Lana Robinson
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People who make money in the cow business are those who establish pastures for year-round grazing, according to David Bade, Extension forage specialist.

During his presentation, "Establishing Pastures for 12-Month Forage," at the Blacklands Income Growth Conference earlier this year, Bade gave forage producers a number of ideas for developing a forage production system and eliminating the need for supplemental feed.

"The goal is to think about what you're doing, and ask yourself, `What are the economics?' It costs $351 a year per head to keep a cow. Broken down, it's $82 for grazing (23 percent) and $75.13 for purchased feed (21 percent). So you see that grazing and feed make up 40 percent of the cost of keeping a cow, and most of that cost is October to April," Bade advised. "The average feed and grazing cost in Texas is $150 per cow (range $120-$210). Profitable managers are able to cut this by half."

To succeed, Bade said forage producers must have an established plan.

"First, do you know something about the yield? A lot depends on temperatures. The growth rate of grass is best when the temperature is 85-95 degrees. And there are yield differences between species. Eighty percent of the growth of native pastures comes in spring and early summer. You have to know that to use it in the system," he pointed out. "You need to know about oats, wheat, and rye grass. Small grain pastures peak in December, are sluggish in January and February, and then they take off."

Bade recommended that producers record dates so they know when to put cattle on small grains and when to pull them off.

"Cool season legumes make high quality grazing. Again, you have to know something about the quality and quantity of these different grasses," he said.

Bade said a key question, after calculating the costs of grazing hay and feed for each animal unit, is "Can I afford to plant this winter pasture as opposed to hay or cubes?"

Next, he said to compare the quantity and goal with animal requirements.

"Do they match up? Maybe you should think about moving your calving dates to keep your dry cows during the winter and then calve right before the spring flush of grass. The stocker cattle situation is completely different, but you still must know their requirements and match it up," he said.

A critical step in the establishment of a 12-month forage system, said Bade, is to identify the times of the year that hay quantity and/or quality is lacking. Then he outlined economical ways to make up those deficiencies: reduction of hay needs; raising/purchasing quality hays/silage; and knowing hay quality and feeding according to quality.

To test hay for protein, Bade suggested looking at the leaf, maturity, weed content, and then quality. Look at the body condition of animals and the animals' feces.

"Legumes really make a difference. They are 25 percent protein," he said.

Use of clovers can also reduce fertilizer costs, the forage specialist noted.

Bade said standing hay, another economical option for stretching grazing which is foreign to most Texas producers, deserves a look. He warned that stand failures can occur from a poorly prepared seedbed, inadequate moisture at planting, poor quality seed, and planting too deep.

"If you decide you're going to produce standing hay of good quality, fertilize it in September and use an electric fence to force the cows to eat it. Quality is better when you first utilize it," he said. "In February, you may need to send clippings to the lab to see if you need to add a little protein."

Finally, he said to use supplements only when they're needed, based on knowledge, not a calendar.