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Perennial Forage Season of Use

The success of cool season grasses in our Northeast Kansas forage systems has made it easy to be comfortable and satisfied with what we have and look no further. Why fix what isn't broken? In some cases, however, the system might *be* broken, or at least in need of evaluation.

There are numerous reasons cool season grass stands may not be performing optimally. Weed increases and woody encroachment may have reduced usable acreage. A good soil fertility program takes time *and* money and correcting a deficient program can be a costly challenge. Some stands simply haven't fared well after previous grazing/haying pressure, drought, armyworm damage, etc... It may make you consider other forage alternatives.

If you are looking at the perennial and annual options available as you consider retaining or renovating a current cool season stand - or starting over altogether - one thing to consider is season of use. For simplicity, a quick look at brome production (cool season) versus native grass (warm season) production tells a pretty good story.

Brome (cool season) production begins in early spring, with five percent of the season's dry matter forage production occurring in March and another 15 percent in April. As temperatures increase in May, production skyrockets. Fifty percent of a fertilized bromegrass stand's dry matter production occurs in May (30 percent in unfertilized stands), before dropping drastically (20 percent) in June. For July/August, brome earns its cool season label with almost zero production from stands that may actually go dormant during hot/dry weather. We'll likely see another flush of growth as temperatures cool in early fall when the final 10 percent of production occurs.

Contrast that to production from warm season native tallgrass species (big bluestem, Indiangrass, little bluestem, switchgrass, etc...). Only five percent of their production occurs prior to May. May accounts for 30 percent of a stand's annual dry matter production and June almost 35 percent. In July and August, when cool season species are in dormancy, warm season species continue to thrive with 20 and ten percent of the annual production occurring during those two months respectively. Because they prefer warmer temperatures, production is all but done by September.

Why consider 'mixing it up' from the forage system side? From a hay production standpoint, the differences in maturity might spread the workload needed for high quality forage production over a longer time frame (NOTE: if you are only worried about yield from the hay crop, this will be less important.). From a grazing animal standpoint, the quality of feedstuff in front of the animal can change drastically through the season – affecting animal performance along the way (for more on the animal performance side of the equation, visit with District Livestock/Natural Resources Agent Ross Mosteller).

If you're looking at changes – because you *want* to or because you *have* to – don't forget about differences in season of use and how that can affect everything from yield and quality to workload and animal performance. If you're going to be doing something different anyway, a second look at some options is in order.