Meadowlark District Extension News
June 6, 2025

David G. Hallauer, District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

Evaluating Forage Stand Competitiveness

Competition from undesirable species is one of the biggest challenges facing forage growers. Broadleaf weeds, brush, and invasive grasses *very* effectively use any opening in the plant canopy to get established in our forage stands. Take this USDA Plant Fact Sheet statement on one of our more common invaders: broomsedge bluestem: *it increases in plant numbers as more desirable vegetation is selectively grazed by livestock. If left uncontrolled, broomsedge bluestem can become the dominant grass in abused, overgrazed range and pastures*. Keeping grass stands competitive *has* to be a focus in 2025 if we want them in good shape for 2026.

Start with a ten-thousand-foot view assessment. Is the stand mostly consistent or more variable? Are the plants in the stand our more productive species or are they more weedy in nature? What 'glaring' issues do you note?

Next, look *down* in the plant canopy. Does it consist of a dense stand of desirable species, or are invaders on the increase? We see the brome/fescue/etc… in cool season stands right now because they're reaching maturity, but warm season invasives like broomsedge or foxtail have likely emerged and await canopy removal (haying, grazing, etc…) to get a foothold.

Step three is to ask why. Why is the stand thinning? Why is that broomsedge spot getting larger? Why were the mustards such an issue this year? Sometimes these questions come with easy answers like 'that's where I stacked hay for a period last summer' or 'the fertility on this place has been a struggle since day one'. Other times, the issues require a deeper look into not only what you did *this* season, but last season - or five seasons go. Issues may even be due to (or compounded by) factors out of our control. Weather is one example. How did the stand recover last fall or the fall before that? Were dry soils early in the growing season a contributor to reduced forage production? All are factors that could affect production and deserve our attention.

The last step may also be the first step for next season. While there are things we can still do this growing season (mowing height, bales left in the field, grazing pressure, etc…) to help reduce some of our problems, a look ahead is also important. Should we alter our fertility program (rate, timing, etc…) or do we have enough information yet to do so? Are there other resources available to evaluate longer term how this pasture has performed or what variability there may be across it (answer: yes). Changes often take time to implement, making current observations all the more important so they can start to be implemented sooner than later.