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Fall Foraging

October signals the end of the summer pasture grazing season for many lease arrangements and management situations. However, this doesn't mean that there is not a wealth of grazing resources available to livestock to utilize during autumn. In fact, it is the one time of year, with a bit of pre-planning, that there are as many options to graze animals as any other time in the year. Let's take a bite into the options for fall foraging today.

Feed costs typically are the greatest expense for a livestock operation, and with winter just around the corner, it is wise to plan for feeding herds and flocks in the months ahead. Baled forage resources are more plentiful this year across the Midwest, but feeding harvested forages almost always comes with more cost versus grazing. The easiest way to reduce winter feed cost is to add grazing days and optimize forage utilization in the fall.

Crop residue is one of the most abundant fall grazing resources. Cornstalks and grain sorghum stalks are common crop residues for grazing livestock across Kansas. Mature, non-lactating animals can usually maintain body condition on stalks with little to no protein supplementation. If left to their own devices, animals selectively graze higher quality plant parts, like leaves, husks and dropped grain first. Supplementation may be necessary depending on the class of livestock, grazing management, weather conditions and length of grazing window. Turn livestock out on crop residue as soon as possible after grain harvest to take advantage of higher residue quality.

Annual forages are another forage tool in the fall grazing toolbox. It is too late at this time of year to plant summer annuals, but if those have been planted, this is a great opportunity to extend grazing. Warm season plants that have been grown through the heat of summer can be grazed standing or placed in windrows to be grazed later. Caution does need to be considered around sorghum species in relation to nitrates and prussic acid. Mixes of grasses, legumes, brassicas and broadleaves can increase the quality of this annual forage option, reduces some of these risks and lends to extended grazing days, if the various plants have more cold tolerance compared to others.

While it might be too late to plant summer annuals, it's not too late to put in cool season annuals such as cereal grains, brassicas and other cold tolerant species. One benefit to this class of plants is that many will overwinter and provide early spring grazing opportunities as well. There are also cool seasons that will not overwinter, but provide good fall grazing, such as oats and barley. The sooner in fall these crops are planted, it stands to reason that more grazing days can be obtained.

The final notable forage resource that can be used to extend fall grazing days is stockpiled perennial forage. This can be cool or warm season pastures, legume hay fields like alfalfa and regrowth on grass hay fields as well. If these resources have been utilized during the grazing season, the best management plan would be to utilize the stockpiled forage after a killing frost, so carbohydrate root reserves can be built during the growing season and not be drained to damage future production.

Strip grazing and adjusting stocking densities can move utilization to fifty percent or more. Unrestricted grazing can hover around the twenty-five percent utilization mark. Small improvements in forage utilization can extend the number of grazing days. Stocking density and the rate of forage degradation significantly impacts how long livestock can rely on these forages as the sole feedstuff. The longer livestock can graze; the fewer days producers must deliver higher cost harvested forages to them. An excellent K-State resource on this subject can be found at: https://www.kcare.k-state.edu/training_events/grazing.html