KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension
Meadowlark District

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Dual Purpose Cover Crops: Grazing and Weed Suppression?

Even as we might still be planting cover crops, it's easy to look ahead at what they might be doing. A lot of what they do accomplish is related to biomass. Check out these recommendations for cereal rye biomass needs from the University of Wisconsin as it relates to the work we can expect from this popular cover crop:

- Nitrogen Capture and Management: 1,000 – 2,000 lbs. per acre
- Reducing Erosion and Phosphorus Loss in Runoff: 1,500 lbs. per acre
- Weed Suppression: 3,500 – 4,500 lbs. per acre

That's a big difference in biomass and underscores that while we want our cover crop plantings to 'do everything', that's not feasible.

In many of our systems, we also want to get some forage utilization from cover crop stands, and that can affect the other uses as well. For example: how might grazing affect the weed suppression features of a cover crop stand? For that interaction, we can look at work by former Kansas State University Master's student Lily Woitaszewski.

Woitaszewski spent the 2021-2022 winter cover crop grazing season looking at the effect of grazing cover crops on suppression of various weed species at three different locations. At one site, moderate to heavy grazing *did* have an influence on the weed suppression value of the cover crop. Summer annual weeds in particular were the challenge in a system where grazing reduced biomass and allowed them to get a foothold.

At two other sites, however, grazing had no influence on preplant weed suppression by the cover crops. Horseweed, chickweed, and henbit were the dominant species present at both sites and differing grazing pressure (grazing exclusion cages were added every two weeks to simulate animal removal timings) did little to affect weed biomass levels.

While encouraging, the results suggest just how variable the effects might be when it comes to the dual-purpose use of cover crops for both grazing *and* weed suppression. On one hand, it's good to keep in mind that weed suppression is not the same as weed control so it's unlikely a cover crop will (consistently) provide the same level of weed control as a herbicide program. On the other, there's the potential for weed seed reduction via different 'processes' cover crops might play a part in. That's work we'll cover in more detail in the future.

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Culling Now or Later

Boy howdy, it sure got muddy quickly! What comes as a blessing can also present challenges to other aspects of management. Summer heat delayed weaning and now mud is deterring bringing cows back through the chute for fall management in many operations. One of the decisions spring calving cow herd managers face, is when to cull cows. Cull cows represent an important part of operational income, so getting the most out of cows leaving the herd is important.

Cow-calf producers with spring calving herds typically wean calves in late summer or early fall then make decisions about culling cows from the herd. Culling decisions are based on many factors related to fertility, productivity, management ease, and health. In tandem with the culling decision is marketing, either marketing cull cows immediately or retaining them for marketing later.

Many factors influence this decision, including individual cow health, cash flow needs, resources for retention and feeding, current market conditions versus market expectations, and time. If a cull cow is not healthy enough or structurally sound enough to stay in the herd, immediately going on the trailer for marketing is often the best bet to capture the most value. If a cull cow carries good body condition, she should also join those on the trailer, as adding or maintaining weight will likely be more costly than any revenue gained from the seasonal price upswing.

Conversely, if a cull cow is sound, reasonably healthy and not over-conditioned, AND resources are available, there are multiple retention strategies with the potential for increasing cull cow salvage values in a profitable way. These strategies focus on taking advantage of the typical spring upswing in cull cow prices without spending all the revenue gain on feed intake cost. Additionally, an option may exist to breed the cow and sell her as a bred cow.

The basic math works like this. The decision to feed cows through winter and market in spring or early summer, must be profitable. The net returns for doing this have to be higher than what the value of marketing today is, minus the cost of retaining and feeding those cows. Research done at Oklahoma State in a multi-year study indicated that cows in lower body condition scores (less than 6) had the potential to gain value by feeding through winter.

This was especially true in systems with lower input cost like; dormant native grass pastures, utilizing crop residues, wheat pasture or feeding excess hay supplies. Cows in better body condition at weaning were proven to not necessarily be more profitable by adding weight. In some cases, cows losing or maintaining weight were still profitable, simply by added cull cow value later.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service Fact Sheet AGEC-629 Beef Cull Cow Management and Marketing Alternatives is a good resource for those wanting to dig into this topic. Be careful not to spend all the value gained from feeding cows on feed cost. Push the pencil to see what works for your operation.

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Laura Phillips
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Prepare Your Lawn and Mower for Winter

As winter hits, we start to end our mowing season. This means you should do a final mowing to set your lawn up for success this winter. It is also the perfect time to do a few maintenance steps before letting the mower sit idle in our sheds for the winter.

Typically, cool season grass should get one last mow in late October to early November. Look for weather that is consistently in the upper 40s during the day and 20s to 30s as the signal to do the last mow. Given our warm fall, now is a great time to get that done. Some homeowners are tempted to leave their lawn tall, thinking that it can help insulate the plants. However, tall grass will fall over and create a dense mat, which allows disease to flourish. Too short and it can cause injury to the grass. Instead, mow at the normal recommended height, which is 2.5 to 3.5 inches for tall fescue, and 2 to 3 inches for Kentucky Bluegrass.

After the final mow, you can start maintaining your lawn mower by paying attention to the gas tank. Drain the tank of any gas-powered engines, or you can add a gasoline stabilizer to the tank. If gas is left in the tank untreated, it can become thick and gummy, causing issues for you in the spring.

Second, spark plugs should be replaced. Before putting the new one in, place a few drops of oil inside the hole to lubricate the cylinder. Battery terminals usually corrode during the season, so they should be cleaned with a wire-bristle brush before being removed and stored for winter. It is best to store the batter in a protected location, like a cool basement.

While you are doing this winter preparation, it is a good time to go ahead and do some other maintenance like sharpening mower blades. If there is major damage to the blades you may want to replace them. If you only see minor damage, you can either pay for them to be sharpened or sharpen them yourself.

To sharpen a mower blade, start by removing any dirt, grass, or other debris with a damp cloth and dry the blade. File or grind the blade down to remove any nicks from the cutting edge. If you have a grinding wheel, hold the blade against the wheel to match the existing angle, and run the blade across the wheel, applying light and even pressure as you go. A hand file will work similarly, just slower. With a grinding wheel, it is important to check that the blade is not overheating as you sharpen, as this could damage the blade. Check for major blade damage and replace what can't be fixed. Once it is sharpened, clean the blade with solvent or oil. Do not use water as it can cause rust.

Taking the time to care for your lawnmower now will save you time and money in the spring. If you have any questions about this, or other lawn care issues, make sure to reach out to your local extension office!

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Teresa Hatfield
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Medicare Scams Are on the Rise: Protect Yourself and Your Benefits

We live in a world where scams and fraud are becoming increasingly common. These crimes can affect anyone, but Medicare beneficiaries are often targeted by scammers seeking to steal personal information, including Medicare numbers, Social Security numbers, and financial information.

Medicare fraud can do more than cost you money. It can also affect your health care by creating false claims in your Medicare record and making it more difficult to access services or equipment you may need in the future.

Knowing how these scams work is the first step in protecting yourself.

- **New Medicare Card Scams**

  One common scam involves convincing Medicare beneficiaries that they need a new Medicare card. Scammers may claim that Medicare is replacing paper cards with plastic cards or cards containing computer chips. They then ask for your Medicare number, Social Security number, or bank account information.

  Remember: Medicare will never call you unexpectedly and ask for personal or financial information. If someone contacts you claiming that you need a new Medicare card immediately, hang up and contact Medicare directly.

- **At-Home Genetic Testing Scams**

  Scammers may also target beneficiaries with offers for free at-home genetic testing kits. They often claim the tests will identify your risk for diseases such as cancer or heart disease and may even tell you that Medicare will not cover future treatment if you refuse the test.

  These claims are false.

  While genetic testing can be medically appropriate in some situations, these tests should only be ordered or recommended by your doctor or other qualified health care provider.

- **Durable Medical Equipment (DME) Scams**

  Another common scam involves offers for medical equipment you do not need or that has not been prescribed by your doctor. Frequently advertised items include:

  - Knee, back, and neck braces
  - Walkers
  - Oxygen equipment
  - Diabetes testing supplies

  These products are often promoted as "free," but accepting them could create problems if you later need medically necessary equipment. Medicare records may show that you already received similar items, potentially complicating coverage for equipment you truly need.

  Always consult your doctor before accepting medical equipment or supplies.

- **Tips for Staying Safe**

  Protect yourself from Medicare fraud by following these simple guidelines:

  - Treat your Medicare number like a credit card number.
  - Never give personal information to unsolicited callers.
  - Be skeptical of offers that sound too good to be true.

- Review your Medicare Summary Notice (MSN) or Explanation of Benefits (EOB) for services you did not receive.
- Shred documents containing personal information before disposing of them.
- Work only with trusted health care providers and medical suppliers.
- Hang up on high-pressure callers who demand immediate action or payment.
- **How to Report Suspected Medicare Fraud**

If you suspect Medicare fraud or believe you have been targeted by a scam:

1. Contact the Medicare Fraud Hotline at **1-800-HHS-TIPS (1-800-447-8477)**.
2. Contact the Kansas Senior Health Insurance Counseling for Kansas (SHICK) program at **1-800-860-5260** for assistance.
3. Report scams to the Federal Trade Commission at **www.ftc.gov** or **1-877-438-4338**.

Medicare fraud costs taxpayers billions of dollars each year. By staying informed, protecting your personal information, and reporting suspicious activity, you can help protect yourself and others from becoming victims of fraud.

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Cindy Williams
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No article this week.